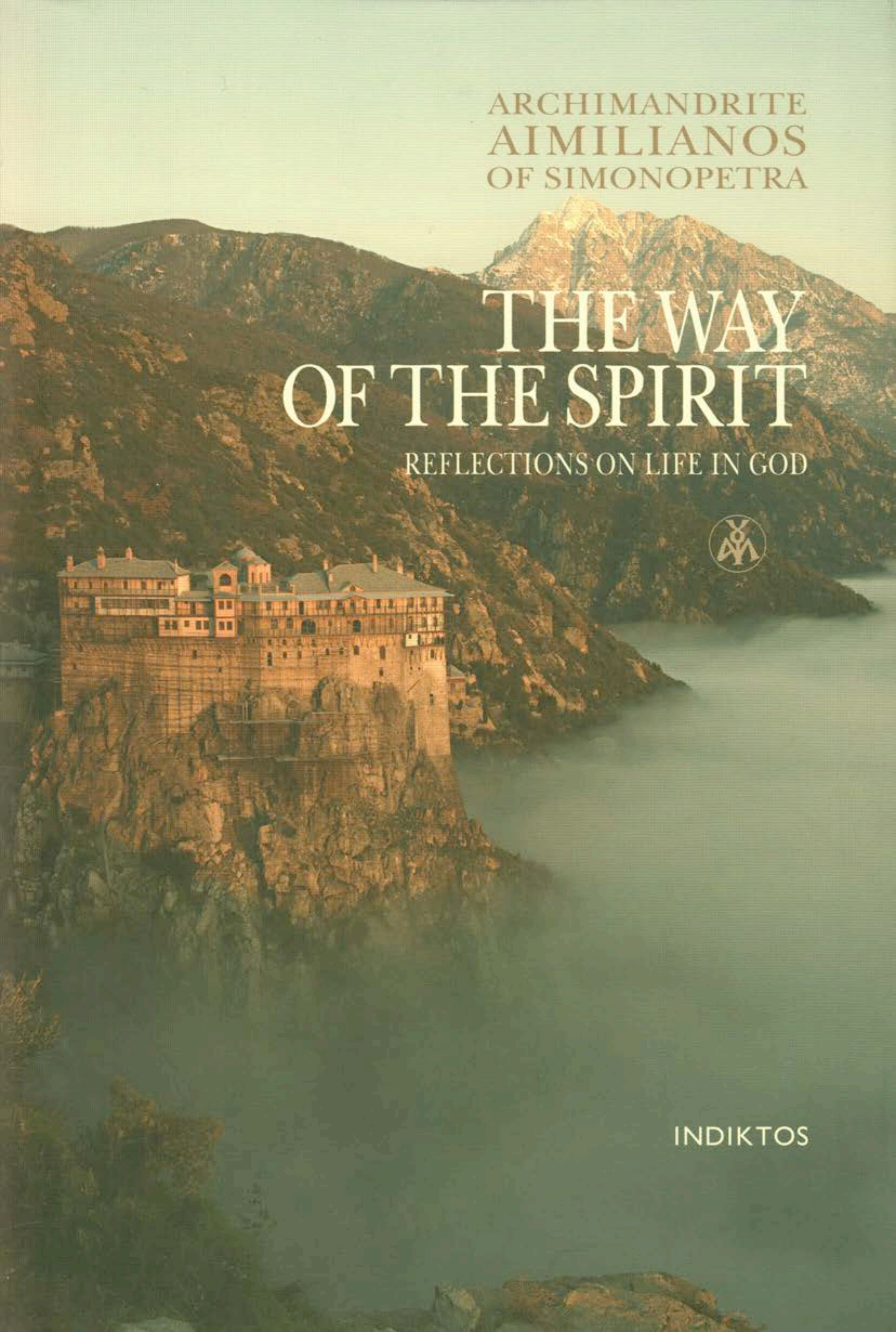

ARCHIMANDRITE
AIMILIANOS
OF SIMONOPETRA

THE WAY OF THE SPIRIT

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE IN GOD

INDIKTOS

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ARCHIMANDRITE
AIMILIANOS
OF SIMONOPETRA

THE WAY OF THE SPIRIT

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE IN GOD

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PREFACE

This book is an offering to our brothers and sisters throughout the world, for *love does not seek its own*, but desires communion with others, teaching us to sing in *other tongues.* We cannot say *we have no need of you*, for without you, our joy will not be complete (1 Cor 13.5, 12.21).

Elder Aimilianos was our guide, teacher, and father in Christ, and remains so to this day. We lived with him for many years, traveling together in the way of the Spirit. The discourses collected in this volume give expression to his personal experience of God, which was always real, living, and dynamic. We believe that they will fill you with joyful hope.

Even so, we have here only the surface, the crest of a rising wave, continuous with an infinite sea. In the receding tide, we discover traces on the shore, like sounds in an empty shell that once harbored life. There we look, listen, and wait. To love, in a sense, is to accept and consent to this distance. But these are no ordinary signs, and from here our journey begins, as on the threshold of spiritual change.

Read this book in a spirit of peace, with no anxiety about understanding new concepts or learning things under pressure. Let your reading and attention be unforced, a form of prayer. As you hold the shell to your ear, listen for the word of God, and enter into communion with Him. *How sweet is the voice of our Beloved! The winter is past, flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come* (Song 2.10-12).

Pentecost 2008

ARCHIMANDRITE ELISAIOS
Abbot of the Sacred Monastery of Simonopetra
Mt. Athos

INTRODUCTION

The Way of the Spirit is a collection of twelve spiritual talks by Elder Aimilianos, who from 1974 until his retirement in 2000 was the abbot of the Sacred Monastery of Simonopetra on Mt. Athos. While many of these talks were originally addressed to monks and nuns, we believe that they speak without distinction to all who thirst for God. Union with God, not through words and theories, but through experience and illumination, is the goal of our sojourn on earth, and it is precisely this teaching that flows from each page of this book. We shall say more about its contents in a moment. Now it is time to introduce its author.

* * *

Elder Aimilianos was born in Athens in 1934 to refugees from Asia Minor who had settled in the Greek capital. His childhood and adolescence unfolded against the background of World War II, the German occupation of Greece, and the Greek civil war. During those troubled times, he lived primarily with his paternal grandmother in the relative safety of a refugee village in Chalkidiki, just a few miles from Mount Athos. As a young man, the elder was active in the church, and distinguished himself as a youth leader and catechetical school instructor. Upon graduating from high school, he entered the Theological School of the University of Athens, where he took a degree in 1959.

At the time of his graduation, he was considering ordination to the priesthood with the intention of becoming a foreign missionary. This was a logical next step for a young theologian who had already demonstrated a gift for the preaching and teaching of the Gospel. In order to prepare for such work, he decided to spend a period of time in a monastery, and was directed by a friend to the

Bishop of Trikala, Dionysios, who was then reviving monastic life in the region of Meteora. The bishop became the elder's spiritual father, and it was at his hands that, on 9 December 1960, the elder was tonsured a monk, given the name of Aimilianos, and enrolled in the brotherhood of the monastery of St. Bessarion. Two days later, he was ordained to the diaconate, and on 15 August of the following year (1961), he was ordained to the priesthood.

Although we are not in a position to know all the details, it seems clear that the elder did not feel an overwhelming, irresistible call to monastic life, which he viewed simply as a stepping stone to missionary work. He was a bright, energetic young man with a future, and was not about to spend the rest of his life in a half-deserted monastery in Thessaly. While he was there, however, he was overtaken by an event of such magnitude that it radically transformed his life, confirmed him permanently in his monastic vocation, and left its mark on all his subsequent work. We learn more about this extraordinary moment in the following remarks by the elder's disciple and successor, Archimandrite Elisaios:

> At the monastery of St. Bessarion, Fr. Aimilianos was granted a revelation of the monastic life, or rather, a profound mystical experience of the light of God, which inundated him at the hour of the Liturgy. Henceforth, his every Divine Liturgy, prepared for by a long vigil, was a sublime experience of God's glory — a mystagogy, reminiscent of the decisive, revelatory events that sealed the history of the people of Israel. As a result, he resolutely made up his mind to partake of the ascetic tradition rather than to assume ecclesiastical duties in the world.[1]

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[1] Archimandrite Elisaios, "The Spiritual Tradition of Simonopetra," in *Mount*

Like the dramatic conversion of St. Paul, the elder emerged from this experience a different man, supremely energized and single-mindedly committed to monastic life. With new-found clarity of purpose, he entered deeply into the mystery of the liturgical life of the Church, and devoted himself to prayer, spiritual study, vigils, fasting and other ascetic labors. Recognizing the remarkable change in the spiritual bearing of his young priest-monk, the bishop appointed him abbot of the monastery of the Transfiguration at Meteora. He additionally assigned him to preach at a large parish church in the city of Trikala, and exhorted him to teach and hear confessions throughout the surrounding region. He was only twenty-seven years old.

By all accounts the elder was a spell-binding preacher. Exploiting to the full an elevated, indeed charismatic, rhetorical style, he poured forth a torrent of discourse. With a brilliant sense of drama and timing, he delivered himself of striking utterances, often rising to the level of poetry and exalted religious praise. With his large expressive face and eyes, he established close and immediate relation with his listeners, whom he addressed in a voice of astonishing power and range, capable of extraordinary modulation from a soft, bewitching whisper to a booming Vesuvian roar. The gift of eloquence of course was not an end in itself, but was given back to God and placed in the service of the Gospel.

The elder soon took the region captive, especially its youth, who flocked to hear him in great numbers. Teaching by word and example, both from his monastic enclosure and in the heart of the city, he acquired a rapidly growing number of disciples. Many of them felt called to live the monastic life under his direction, and

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Athos the Sacred Bridge: The Spirituality of the Holy Mountain, ed. Dimitri Conomos and Graham Speake (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), 189.

the first tonsures took place in 1963. Others were to follow. In a relatively short period of time, Meteora had become home to a large, dynamic community of young monks. An equal number of women, many of whom were the sisters and cousins of the monks, had also heard the call to monastic life, obliging the elder to convert a nearby, abandoned monastery into a convent. Other disciples married and/or became priests in the world, but all were part of a larger spiritual family which had its center at Meteora and in the spiritual teachings of its young abbot.

Within a few years, however, the increasing pressure of tourism began to disrupt the spiritual life of the new communities. It was either move, or else become museum curators and tour guides for the literally hundreds of visitors bussed in daily during the high season. In 1970, another blow was struck with the death of Bishop Dionysios, the elder's mentor and staunch monastic patron. Flight seemed unavoidable, but to where?

The dilemma was solved by a handful of geriatric monks locked in a decaying mountain fortress on a peninsula in the north Aegean. These were, of course, the aged fathers of Simonopetra, who invited the elder and his brotherhood to settle on Athos and bring new life to their dying community. Devastated by a fire in 1891, and under Turkish rule until 1912, Simonopetra fell further into decline beginning in 1931, after the unjust expulsion of its saintly abbot, Jerome, and the departure of some twenty monks, who left in protest with him. By the 1950s and the whole of the following decade, the specter of depopulation had spread its melancholy wings over the entire peninsula. Like most of the other monasteries, Simonopetra seemed like a vast ruin from the past, haunted by a small number of monks, all of them advanced in years, and with no novices in sight. But things were beginning to change.

For the elder and his monks, the invitation was a gift from God, which they gladly accepted, and on 25 November, 1973, the elder was elected abbot of Simonopetra. His official enthronement followed on 17 December. In his remarks on that day, he described the event as a "new beginning" and a "new birth." He exulted in the Mountain's history and holiness, calling it "the upper room of a permanent Pentecost, from which the grace of the Spirit never ceases to shine its brightness in your soul." Their journey had come to an end, for he and his exiled monks had found "a place of rest for the Lord, a tabernacle to the God of Jacob" (Ps 131.5). But if the journey was over, the work was just beginning, as the monks set about restoring their new home: an ancient, ten-storey labyrinth perched on a cliff 1,000 feet above the sea. Although they could not have fully known it at the time, the presence on Athos of Elder Aimilianos and his brotherhood was a critical factor in the contemporary renewal of monastic life on the peninsula.

In the midst of this already crowded moment, the elder was also seeking a place of rest for his community of nuns. Once again, the monks of Mt. Athos provided the solution. An hour's drive from the Athonite border, in the town of Ormylia, the monastery of Vatopedi possessed an old and unused dependency, which Simonopetra purchased, restored, and extended. On 5 July, 1974, the nuns were established in their new home. The elder consequently became the founder of a large convent, for which he also wrote the constitutional charter, the definitive version of which was conveyed to the convent in May of 1975. Construction on the new church began in 1980, and a formidable monastic complex soon came into being, with over one hundred nuns. The convent, dedicated to the Annunciation of the Theotokos (but more commonly referred to simply as "Ormylia"), is a dependency (*metochion*) of Simonopetra, and follows a modified Athonite *typikon*. In October of 1991, it was given patriarchal and stavropegic status by the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Beginning in 1995, Elder Aimilianos began to suffer from an increasingly debilitating illness that would ultimately force him to step down as abbot of Simonopetra. In 2000, he was succeeded as abbot by his disciple, Archimandrite Elisaios. The elder currently resides at the convent of the Annunciation in Ormylia.

* * *

Elder Aimilianos was a gifted speaker. He was also an extremely prolific speaker, for whoever drinks from the water of life is changed, and becomes one who gives drink, pouring himself out in abundance. Systematic tape-recording of his many sermons and talks began in 1968, and continued without interruption through the spring of 1994. The total archive contains an astonishing 3,000 recordings. This means that, on average, the elder delivered some type of formal, public address one-hundred days out of the year for thirty years. About sixty percent of these were delivered to a monastic audience, and the remaining forty percent in parishes in Greece and Cyprus. A very small number were given at theological gatherings or church conferences and symposia. When invited by a bishop to speak in a town or city, the elder would often give two talks on the same day — usually a Sunday — in two different churches. Needless to say, these figures do not take into account the informal talks and other forms of communication (conversations, correspondence, phone calls), which were part of the elder's daily pastoral ministry.

In terms of their duration, sermons delivered in parishes (normally in the context of the Divine Liturgy) average about forty to forty-five minutes in length. Addresses and talks given in parish halls and similar settings, range from an hour to an hour and a half. The longest are the discourses delivered to monks and nuns, which range from an hour and a half to two hours in length, and often longer. Many of these began before vespers, and continued after compline. The elder also commented extensively on ancient monastic rules and ascetical writings, generating series of talks unfolding over the course of many days, weeks, and months (chap. 8 is a segment from one such series). And it is remarkable that, when addressing his monks and nuns, the elder never spoke from a prepared text, and only rarely used a set of notes.

Like an overflowing spring, the elder ceaselessly poured himself out to his disciples, offering his words to them with all the magnificent prodigality of divine love, like the excess wine at Cana (Jn 2.10), or the multiplication of the loaves of bread (Mk 8.8), which is always the sign of God's grace, the boundless self-distribution of the Son of Man for the life of the world.

* * *

Before bringing this introduction to a close, it will be helpful to say a word about the nature of the texts which appear in this volume. The way we read and respond to a text is in large measure conditioned by what we bring to it, not least by our shared cultural assumptions concerning the kind of work we have in front of us. We do not read a poem in the same way that we read a newspaper. Neither do we read and respond to an instruction manual as we would to a long-awaited letter from a friend. In each case, we approach the text in question and enter into its world of meaning with different presuppositions and expectations, with different levels of energy, attention, and consciousness. What sort of texts, then, do we have here, and how might we best approach them? What will be helpful to bring with us on our journey, and what is best left behind?

Of the twelve talks collected in this volume, three are sermons or homilies that were originally delivered in parishes before large, public audiences (chaps. 2, 3, and 10). They focus on the Gospel reading of the day, or some aspect of the liturgical year, such as the beginning of Great Lent, which provide both structure and a point of departure for related themes and subjects. An equal number (chaps. 9, 11, and 12) were delivered in a non-liturgical setting to small groups of lay theologians and teachers of religion. They tend to combine elements of traditional theological teaching with the inspirational character of homily. This will all be relatively familiar territory to anyone who has heard a sermon or listened to a discussion of theological ideas, and as such presents no special problems to the reader.

The remaining six talks, however (chaps. 1, and 4-8), are special forms of discourse addressed to monks and nuns, given at special gatherings of the community, known as a *synaxis.* At its most literal level, the word *synaxis* denotes a gathering or assembly, especially for public worship and teaching. It is traditionally used to designate the eucharistic liturgy and the gathering of the Church in a particular place. A *synaxis,* then, is the realization and revelation of the Body of Christ; a being present with Christ, which necessarily involves the presence of the entire community. And this is precisely why Christ came: "to gather (*συναγάγῃ*) into one the children of God who were scattered abroad" (Jn 11.52), and thus He "often gathered together (*συνήχϑη*) with His disciples" (Jn 18.2), telling them that, "where two or three are gathered (*συνηγμένοι*) in My name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt 18.20). Outside of this reality, there is only isolation and fragmentation, for "he who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather (*συνάγων*) with Me, scatters" (Mt 12.30).

That the elder was plainly aware of the special character of the monastic *synaxis* is evident in the following passage from chapter 7:

> As you know, we do not come together in these assemblies (*συνάξεις*) to discuss matters of doctrine or problems in ethics. Neither is it my purpose here to offer you personal counseling or advice. Instead, we are here to participate in an event of communion. Our eyes are all focused on the same thing: a particular point or moment in the life of Christ. And because we are all looking at Christ, we are able to behold our imperfections and accomplishments; we see our movement forward or our disengagement and retreat. And thus our assemblies are communications with God Himself, Who sometimes reveals one thing to us, and sometimes another.

As the elder makes clear, the purpose of the *synaxis* is not to "discuss matters of doctrine or problems in ethics." The *synaxis* is not a theological lecture or an academic seminar. Its values are neither intellectual nor even moral, but existential. Second, the radical corporate nature of the gathering does not allow for "personal counseling or advice" designed to satisfy the needs of an isolated individual. The community does not gather in order to "learn" anything, but rather to enter into and experience the mystery of Christ. Like the eucharistic *synaxis*, of which it is an extension, the monastic *synaxis* is an "event of communion," a moment in which the community "looks at Christ," is illumined by the vision of God, and in so doing attains heightened self-knowledge as it becomes the bearer of divine revelation.

Understood in these terms, the monastic *synaxis* does not have immediate parallels within our ordinary experience of language and communication. In essence it is an encounter with Christ in and through the community, concentrated in the charismatic word of the elder, who seeks not to instruct his listeners but to transform them by conforming them to the form of Christ (cf. Rom 8.29; Phil 3.21).

This is why the elder's word is always a *spoken* word — he wrote virtually nothing — for true teaching flows from the person, it emerges through the experience of presence and encounter, inseparable from the living word, whose internment in writing necessarily incurs a loss of power and effectiveness. Only the spoken word makes dialogue possible; only the spoken word makes it possible for an elder to adapt his teaching to the needs of his disciples. The living, existential character of the synaxis cannot be bound by the rigid constraints of dead letters. A sudden tangent will prove to be central, a gratuitous aside will wend its way to a source of light; what seems secondary or superficial will be of paramount significance, the deep foundation. The composition will everywhere vibrate with the harmonies and discords of the community, keyed to the spiritual level of its listeners, being exactly what they needed — or were able — to hear at that time.

The monastic discourses of Elder Aimilianos are thus the record of a pilgrimage, in the truest sense of that word: to "saunter" means to visit the "sacred places" (*saint-terre*), not in a pre-determined, rigidly laid-out plan; not with a relentlessly pursued aim or goal, but rather as an organic unfolding, a spontaneous movement of love and knowledge, forever exceeding its boundaries, and, like all living things, growing beyond its momentary form in fulfillment of its destiny in God.

The Way of the Spirit contains a rich harvest of spiritual experience, cultivated through prayer and tranquility. It is an invitation to partake of the life-giving bread of wisdom. The spiritual instruction and discourses collected in this volume have the Holy Spirit as their inspiration, vesture, and ground of convergence. As you will soon discover, this book is not a theoretical treatise on spirituality or mysticism, but rather a message of love directly shaped by the living experience of life in the Spirit, the mystical cry of the soul, ever seeking union with God.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

The Way of the Spirit is an English translation of twelve, tape-recorded homilies and discourses by Elder Aimilianos that were first published in Greek in 1998 (see below, "Texts and Translations"). In addition to the Greek printed text, we have made use of the original tape-recordings, partly to clarify ambiguities in the printed text, and partly to attend to the nuances of voice and expression. We have endeavored to reproduce faithfully the original sense of the text and as much of its style and form as possible, remaining conscious of the fact that translation necessarily involves the composition of a new text, in a new tongue, which has to stand on its own.

In the translation of certain key terms, we have striven for consistency, and in general have followed the usage of the English *Philokalia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979-1995). Thus we have, for example, consistently translated the Greek word "nous" as "intellect." Readers unfamiliar with such terms, or those wishing to learn more about them, are encouraged to consult the "Glossary" which appears at the end of each volume of the English *Philokalia.*

Old Testament references are based on the Septuagint, which for some Biblical books – the Psalms in particular – follows a slightly different numbering than the more familiar Hebrew version. Here, too, the interested reader will find an explanation of these differences in the introductory notes to the English *Philokalia.*

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

Publication of Elder Aimilianos' works began in 1995, with a five-volume series called "Spiritual Instructions and Discourses" (Convent of the Annunciation: Ormylia, 1995-2006). Of these, an English translation of the first volume, *The Authentic Seal,* appeared in 1999. The present volume, *The Way of the Spirit,* is a translation of the second volume in this series, the Greek original of which first appeared in 1998. All five volumes are now available in a French translation (Ormylia, 1998-2006). There are also translations, in various states of completion, in Romanian (vols 1-2, 1999-2000), Serbian (vols 1-5, 2003-2006), and Russian (a 2002 anthology; and vols 1-2, 2006). Two anthologies of the elder's teachings, each containing eight talks selected from across the five volumes, and published in small, paper-back format, appeared in Greek in 2004 and 2005. Of these, the first is available in English as *The Church at Prayer: The Mystical Liturgy of the Heart* (Indiktos, Athens: 2005). Recently a new series has been launched, of which two substantial volumes have thus far appeared in Greek: (1) *Commentary on the Ascetical Homilies of Abba Isaiah* (Indiktos: Athens, 2005), with an introduction by Fr. Placide Deseille, and (2) *Commentary on St. Hesychios, On Watchfulness* (Indiktos: Athens, 2007), with an introduction by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. A Romanian translation of the *Commentary* on Abba Isaiah appeared in 2006.

1. THE PROGRESSION OF THE SOUL*

FIRST ASSEMBLY

Our subject today is the progression of the soul, not from the moment when it decides to live a Christian life, but rather when it begins to confront the problem of spiritual progress itself. Our concern is thus with the *life* of the soul, with the manner in which it lives.

This is a very broad subject, and no one can claim to analyze it fully. Why? Because matters concerning the spiritual life do not have their foundations in human logic. That is not where they begin. This is why, generally speaking, any discussion that attempts to analyze a spiritual topic solely from the point of view of human logic will inevitably break down.

Strictly speaking, then, our subject is neither theological nor academic. Instead, it is purely practical, and we encounter it in the course of our everyday experience. For example, if you walk from here to the center of town, you know that you'll pass by this or that place, and that you'll need to do precisely this or that in order to get there. You have acquired this knowledge as the direct result of actual, practical living, and not by means of any theory. This is why, in what follows, some of the things we shall say may seem a little different to you, relatively speaking.

When does a soul begin to think about its spiritual life? When does it begin to contemplate a new course of action, to depart from its former habits and routines? This is *itself* the starting point. But be careful here in terms of what we're saying about the soul "thinking." This is a word borrowed from our everyday experience, but the soul does not in fact "think" about its progress: it simply *lives* something. So when we say that the soul "thinks" about starting or doing something, what we mean is that it feels the tremor of an inclination to depart from the place in which it finds itself, and to move somewhere else, to live differently, in a different manner.

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* Delivered on 27 and 28 May, 1973, in Athens, to the sisters and young women who were later to form the monastic community of the Annunciation at Ormylia.

You see, the terms we use are all very simple and straightforward. For example, when we use the language of "seeing" or "thinking," or when we describe the soul as "knowing" and "deciding," we're simply using expressions derived either from the world around us, or from our inner, psychological world. Such expressions, however, do not correspond fully to our true existence; they do not adequately describe our spiritual concepts.

When is it, then, that a soul says: "I must live a Christian life, I must live differently"? When it acquires the sense that it is a soul in exile; when it realizes that it is something that has been cast away, and now exists outside of its proper place, outside of paradise, in a foreign land, beyond the borders within which it was made to dwell. That's what "exiled" means. And when the soul becomes conscious of this, and remembers its place of origin, then it can say: "I must return to my home."

It follows, then, that when the soul realizes it doesn't have God; when it feels itself to be in a state of exile without a home, without a father, estranged from its creator – that it has become like an object long since discarded and having no real contact with God – then it can say, in its exile: *I feed with swine and eat husks. I shall go back to my Father* (Lk 15.16-18).

This is when the soul begins to make progress: when it feels what Scripture calls the *dividing wall of hostility* (cf. Eph 2.14), the barrier that has risen up between us and God, and which separates us from Him. But if we don't feel such a wall between us and God, if we don't feel that we are exiles, then we haven't even begun to think about the spiritual life.[1]

The spiritual life, you see, begins with a kind of vision, with the feeling or perception of banishment, and this is not arrived at by means of any intellectual analysis or evaluation. I simply feel within myself the presence of a wall, a barrier, and I don't know what's beyond it.

Thus when the soul realizes the distance between itself and God — a distance so great that no matter how loudly it cries out it will never be heard by God — *then* it will understand how utterly devastating it is not to be able to talk to God. At that point it will seek to approach Him, to bring Him close to itself, and itself close to Him.

When the soul feels this condition of rejection and exile, that it's been cast off and thrown aside — and this includes a soul that men may praise or flatter, and even one with a degree of purity, chastity, spiritual qualities, lofty aspirations, and inclinations for the divine – when such a soul, I say, finally understands that it's been discarded, that it needs to find its place in history and in the common body of the Church, then it can say: "I'll go and seek my true home."

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[1] See also Arch. Aimilianos, "Catechism on Prayer," 199: "God is in heaven, and I am down here on earth. . . . So when I pray, I feel at once this insurmountable obstacle blocking me off from God, namely: the fact that I am carnal, that I am flesh - in the Gospel's sense of 'flesh' — whereas God is Spirit." Compare St. Isaiah the Solitary, *On Guarding the Intellect* 13: "All these things (i.e., sensual pleasure, resentment, hatred, etc.) are a wall (cf. Eph 2.14) imprisoning our wretched soul . . . they obstruct its ascent and prevent it from meeting God" (*Philokalia*, 1:24-25); St. John Klimakos, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 29: "Let us break through this *dividing wall* (Eph 2.14), which we have erected to our own harm by disobedience" (Moore, 224); St. Maximos the Confessor, *Fourth Century on Various Texts* 63: "By *dividing wall* (Eph 2.14), Scripture means the natural law of the body, and by *barrier* (ibid.) that attachment to the passions according to the law of the flesh which constitutes sin" (*Philokalia*, 2:251); and St. Peter of Damascus, *On the Two Kinds of Faith*: "Even if I want to return whence I fell, I cannot do so, since my own will has become a *dividing wall* (Eph 2.14) between myself and God" (*Philokalia*, 3:215).

It follows then that the spiritual life begins with the feeling of exile, of banishment, of an obstacle in our path, and with the desire to cease being an object that has been discarded and cast aside. And such a desire is perfectly natural: when you see something that's fallen or been dropped, it's natural to want to pick it up and put it back in its place. But if the soul doesn't have this feeling, it can't even *begin* to embark upon a spiritual life. It may live a Christian life, but only in a manner of speaking, only in appearance, only on an intellectual level, only within the limits of its own conceptions. But to the extent that this strong feeling is absent from our soul, we haven't even begun to make a beginning. To use the language of the liturgy, we haven't yet made the words "Blessed is our God" a real part of our life.[2] We're still too far away to reach the beginning of the Midnight Service – never mind Matins – and from there to proceed to the Divine Liturgy, which will unite us to God, to the extent that this is possible for us.

Thus the first element we need in order to embark on our path is the feeling of exile.

Before us now is the shaken soul, the cast-away soul, closed in by four walls and unable to see a thing. This same soul, however, is thinking about breaching the barrier, about breaking down the walls within which it has come to live, and to live instead with God. How must it proceed?

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[2] The words "Blessed is our God always, now and ever and to the ages of ages" are intoned by the priest at the start of most of the services of the Orthodox Church.

Here we need to know that, contrary to our expectations, there is no "must." Such a word does not exist within the Christian life. The idea that something "must" be, or "must" take place, is a product of the intellect; it is something that I arrive at as a logical conclusion, a deduction based on something in the Gospels, or which Christ taught in his parables, or with respect to His ethical teachings to do this or that. But the word "must" has never moved anyone to do anything. On the contrary, it makes you feel like a slave and discourages you from moving forward. The force of "must" moves neither God, nor the heart. It pertains only to the logic of human deliberation, to the endurance of human determination, which as we all know is something that unravels and comes apart very easily.

The most fragile thing in the world is the human heart, along with all of its deliberations and determinations. The things about you that I love, I may later come to hate. And the things about you that I now hate may later cause me to fall in love with you. I may condemn you, and on the same grounds proclaim that you're the best person in the world. I can exalt you to the skies, and at the same time wish you were in hell. I may decide to become a saint, and at that very moment become a devil.

You can see, then, that the expression "must" does not exist here. I can't say: "What must I do now?" On its own, and prior to all intellectual deliberations, the soul has to act and move forward on the basis of what a moment ago we called a kind of vision, that is, on the basis of its inner perception and feeling for things.

Let us enter more deeply into the main image that we have before us. Man is now cast out of paradise. His soul has been exiled.

Outside the gates of Eden, he comprehends nothing but his own pain. And thus Scripture says: *in pain you shall bring forth children* (Gen 3.16), and *in pain you shall sow and harvest the fruits of the earth* (cf. Gen 3.18-19). Whatever you do will be accomplished in pain.

When do we begin to feel this pain? From the moment we experience pleasure. Pain has its roots in pleasure.[3] And when did we begin to experience pleasure? When we realized we were naked. Remember what happened to Adam in paradise: *he ate of the fruit and became naked* (Gen 3.7). Moreover, we can say that, from the moment Adam began to *think* about tasting the forbidden fruit, he had already fallen and been reduced to nakedness. In this sense, Eve too, having entered into conversation with the serpent, was likewise already naked, but neither of them could see this until they had both eaten of the tree. But both of them were inwardly already naked, otherwise they would not have eaten of the fruit in the first place. Food, and the subsequent sensation of pleasure, merely revealed to them what had already become a fact.

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[3] See St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Various Texts* 53: "Since it is the nature of every vice to destroy itself along with the habits which brought it into being, man learns through experience that every pleasure is inevitably succeeded by pain, and so he directs his whole effort toward pleasure and does all that he can to avoid pain. . . . By doing this he hopes to keep the two apart from each other — which is impossible — and to indulge his self-love in ways that increase his pleasure and are entirely free from pain. Dominated by the passion of self-love, he is, it appears, ignorant of the fact that pleasure can never exist without pain. For pain is intertwined with pleasure, even though this seems to escape the notice of those who suffer it. It escapes their notice because desire for pleasure is the dominating force in self-love, and what dominates is naturally always more conspicuous and obscures one's sense of what may also be present with it. Thus in pursuing pleasure and trying to escape pain out of self-love, we give birth to untold corrupting passions in ourselves" (*Philokalia*, 2:175); cf. id., *Fourth Century on Various Texts* 33-35 (ibid., 2:243-244).

Now note this very carefully, because the soul's progress is of the greatest importance: we begin with pain, which is directly related to nakedness. The soul has to realize that it is naked — not simply something discarded — but something naked. It has to realize, in other words, that it is nothing. Who were Adam and Eve? In simple terms, they were people who walked with God, who dwelt with God. They were God's companions, God's fellow-travelers, and as such they were gods themselves! (cf. Jn 10.34; Ps 81.6). And yet in one single moment they became nothing at all, so utterly wretched that a mere snake was able to deceive them. And in this way, the brute beasts, over which Adam and Eve had been given authority (cf. Gen 1.28), were now able to rise up against them. That is how man became the most cowardly creature in history!

Naked man is something tragically diminished in his being. He is nothing and has only the consciousness of his nakedness, only the awareness of his sin, only the knowledge that he is a sinner. And this does not mean that I say things like "I am a sinner," or "I must go to confession," but it is rather an existential situation in which the soul is much more profoundly aware of its sin.

As we said a moment ago, Adam and Eve were in a sense already naked, although they were not conscious of their nakedness. It was only when they sinned that they saw that they were naked and subsequently clothed themselves. Like them, the soul must also feel that it is stripped of every virtue, devoid of all holiness, bereft of divinity. It must realize that it is submerged in sin, clothed in nothing but the leaves of its own iniquities.

Will the soul, then, be able to *feel* this sin? Yes, but not in the same way one feels an object in the physical world. I can't say to you:

"Feel sin!" It's not something that can be produced on demand. It's an action, an activity, a response, a step taken by the soul itself. And it is something the soul must do on its own, figure out for itself, because no power on earth, not even God Himself, can make the soul sense its own sinfulness. Any soul can go to confession, read spiritual books, pray much, and shed copious tears. But all of that can take place without the sense of sin that we are describing here.

When the soul acquires this feeling of nakedness and says, "I am naked, I must clothe myself," then it has the possibility to feel the need for repentance, the need to be properly clothed. But *arriving* at the place of repentance is another matter entirely. It's one thing to be naked and another thing to manufacture clothing. The two things are miles apart.

The feeling of spiritual nakedness — which might last for years or only an instant — is the most critical moment in my life, because at that point one of two things will happen: either I'll get up and get dressed or I'll remain naked.[4] In other words, I'll either present myself to God in my nakedness and say, "I have sinned," or I'll try to hide from God, like Adam and Eve. And when God says: *"Adam, where are you?"*, I'll say: *"Hiding, because I'm naked"* (cf. Gen 3.9-10). And when I emerge from my hiding place, He'll see my fig leaves.[5]

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[4] See Arch. Aimilianos, "Catechism on Prayer," 213-214: "This is the critical point. Why? Because it is precisely the moment when we accept or refuse to accept our selves, because we discover a self so dirty, so dark, so devious, so cunning, that it costs us dearly, that it's not in our interest to acknowledge it, and so we hide behind our egotism, behind the knowledge of the self, behind the love of self, which is in every soul."

[5] For a similar interpretation of the fall and the fig leaves, see the Second Canticle of the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete (*Lenten Triodion*, 381-382). According to St. John Chrysostom, Christ curses precisely the *leaves* of the fig tree (Mt 21.19)

Why do we so often choose to conceal ourselves and cover things up? For the simple reason that it is a terrible thing for us to realize that we are nothing. Do you know what it means to go from thinking that you're special and important, from being respected publicly, from thinking that you've done great things, from being talented, wonderful, good-looking, charming, and I don't know what else besides, to recognizing that, on the contrary, you're naked and of no consequence whatsoever? It requires strength to accept that, a lot of strength. And yet we can't even accept the slightest blemish that we might have, or any fault, failure, error or sin that we may have committed, without covering it up with a lie, and then covering up that lie with a second one, and then the second with a third.

A person may conceal his or her nakedness by means of an inferiority complex, by acts of aggression, by self-justification, by donning various masks, and by many other means. Let me give you an example. It will be one taken from external experience, because I can't tell you anything else: that would be too deep.

Your professor asks you a question in class, and all the other students make fun of you because you don't know the answer. You get up, leave school, and go straight home. You stand in front of the mirror, fix yourself up, and put on your make-up, even though

in counterpoint to their use by fallen human beings (PG 59:588, lines 5-12). See also St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns of Divine Love* 11: "I was incapable of bearing the sight of God's glory: I turned away and fled into the darkness of earthly pleasures. I concealed myself and I took shelter in the ideas of this world as if I were penetrating a tomb and, instead of stone, I clothed myself with this unwieldly body for shelter, to conceal myself — I thought — from the One who is present everywhere.... Yes, shivering, incapable of contemplating His glory, I preferred to slip and to remain in the tomb, and to live with the dead rather than to be kindled with love and die completely" (Maloney, 38).

there's no one there to see you. But there, in front of the mirror, all by yourself — with that "self" which is everything to you — you can assure yourself that: "I, who they made fun of, am beautiful."

In this way, I seek to regain my balance, to compensate for the weakness exposed by my teacher and my classmates. At such a moment, when I'm in front of the mirror, I'm not standing there in my nakedness, in my inability to answer questions, but instead I'm standing on what I believe are my good qualities, such as my beauty, be it genuine or the artificial effect of make-up. And such "beauty" may be physical, emotional, intellectual, or even "spiritual," as we are now in the habit of saying. But it makes no difference. Whatever it is, it's a substitute for my nakedness.

Such strategies of denial also involve concealment from myself. What does that mean? It means that, even though I'm naked, I'll live as though I were not, and thus live a double life. Or I may refuse to grow and progress, as though I weren't naked at all. And this is something much more terrible, for it is the rejection of reality, and such a rejection can only have tragic consequences for me.

Life is full of people like that. They know they're sinners, they know they're naked, and yet they go through life doing the very things which they hate, which disgust them, which they know are beneath them. And they know that they must somehow silence the terrible cry of their conscience, which torments them (cf. Rom 7.15-20).

The soul's other alternative is to accept its situation and say: "I'll do something about my nakedness. I will declare my sin. I will confess my sin and my nakedness" (cf. Ps 31.5; 37.18). And naked though I be, I will nevertheless present myself to God. I'll tell Him: "*You* clothe me." And that takes great strength. To turn to God as if nothing else in the world exists requires tremendous honesty and authenticity. And what are the means by which I will either accept my nakedness or pursue a life of concealment? That which we call the ego, the self. Not the ego in the sense of boasting and selfishness, but rather in the sense of an inner balance, a proper self-knowledge and equilibrium.

Here we are reminded of Saint Augustine.[6] For many years he suffered and wanted to repent. Why did he suffer so? Because he was in conflict with his ego. During one period of his life, he subjected his ego to philosophy, which barred his way to the path of salvation. Before that, the heresy of Manichaeism stood in his way, and its system of false knowledge served as a covering for his nakedness.[7] But afterwards he humbled himself, and, together with his young child, was baptized and entered the Church. It was then that he discovered his nakedness, and clothed himself in the garments of righteousness that God had prepared for him. And afterwards he even became a bishop.

This balance, this well-regulated scale upon which so much depends, is our inner disposition, our inner character and attitude of will. And this disposition, this internal lever, is the ego. It is that upon which we lean and rely. What does the ego desire? One thing only: either to affirm or deny itself, according to the words of Christ: *If anyone wants to follow me, let him deny himself* (Mt 16.24; cf. Mk 8.34). This, then, is the crucial moment in my life when I'll either deny or accept myself, that is, my fallen, lower self. This is the point at which I will either acknowledge my nakedness or cover myself with fig leaves. But if I remain naked — note this carefully — if I present myself naked before God, I embark upon the third stage of the soul's progression.

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[6] Bishop of Hippo Regius (in Tunisia, North Africa), from ca. 396 to 430. Among his many works are his *Confessions*, a kind of spiritual autobiography. For his life, along with a discussion of his place in the Orthodox Church, see "Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo," in *Synaxarion*, 5:514-520.

[7] Named after its founder, the Persian religious leader Mani (d. 277), Manichaeism was a system of metaphysical and ethical dualism in which eternal principles of good and evil were locked in perpetual conflict. It was refuted by many Church Fathers, including St. John of Damascus, *Against the Manichaeans* (Kotter, 4:351-398); see also his brief description of Manichaean beliefs in *On Heresies* 66 (FOTC 37:127). St. Augustine discusses his own involvement with, and eventual rejection of, Manichaeism in books 3 and 5 of the *Confessions*.

Now we are at the beginning of the journey, the point of departure. The progression that unfolds before us is an ascent, a power conveying us upwards. More precisely, it is a movement of return, a holy tremor of the soul, which the soul generates on its own. Think, for a moment, about the sharp, spontaneous, inner reaction I may have if you say something offensive or hurtful to me. This is similar to what we mean when we speak of a "tremor" in the soul, namely: a strong, spontaneous, inner reaction.

The soul, therefore, must enact this moment of conversion. It must return to the place from which it came forth, it must return to the hands of God. Moreover the soul must return in its poverty. Does this mean that man was poor in paradise? Remember Adam. He was rich. He had the whole universe for his own. But then the serpent said to him: "What did God tell you? Not to eat of the fruit of the tree? But if you want to become god, if you want to rule over the whole world, eat this fruit" (cf. Gen 3.1-5).

In response to the serpent's subtle wisdom (cf. Gen 3.1), Adam acknowledged his spiritual poverty, and so he ate, in order to become rich, to become a god! Our own soul is now in that same position. It has just eaten of the fruit. Indeed it has just realized that all along it has been eating of that fruit, and must now return to its former poverty, that is, to what it once thought was its poverty, realizing now that such poverty was in fact its beauty, its glory, its divinity, the very threshold of heaven itself. As we have said, the soul must make this movement of return. Let me put it somewhat differently: it must make a *circular* movement.

What does "circular" mean in this context? Why do I use this word? A movement from one place to another may be linear and direct. Thus we say that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and this may be true, but it also distances you from your place of origin. Other forms of movement may be broken, haphazard, and circuitous. Still other forms are circular, bringing you back to yourself. A movement like that encircles you. The soul's "circular" movement, therefore, describes the soul's propensity to unfold and extend outward, as well as its movement of return and reinstatement within itself.

It follows, then, that we possess the power of return in order to retrace our steps back to the place from which we were cast out. This is why such a return is always a movement toward our own self. Of course, no matter what we do we can never actually escape ourselves. All of our outward movements — our desire for knowledge and power, our alleged virtues and various aspirations — are simply specious substitutes; so much shabby clothing behind which we seek to conceal our nakedness. The perfection of the circle, however, keeps us within the sphere of God, and, at the same time, at home in our own lives. This is why I called it a movement of return, because it brings us back. And it is circular because we abide within our true selves, we remain within our own being.[8]

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[8] See St. Gregory Palamas, *In Defense of Those who Devoutly Practise a Life of Stillness* 5: "The intellect is not like the eye which sees other visible things but does

Now this propensity to return to myself, this circulation of the self, this progression toward the recognition of my nakedness, creates within us another impulse: the desire for flight. In other words, now that I've finally returned to myself, I find that I want to take care of myself, to work on myself.[9] And where do we work best: in the midst of noise and turmoil, or in a state of tranquility? In the midst of an unruly crowd or when you're by yourself? Clearly, in solitude. The soul, then, when it has reached this stage and wants to return to itself and to God, has a strong impulse to flee. It experiences a powerful attraction from another pole.

The impulse to flee brings us in turn to the question of voluntary exile. What I mean is this: if I want to flee from here, I have to forget about you, I have to become a stranger to you. As a result, the feeling, the attraction, the disposition, the inclination, and the propensity towards flight, create within me the desire for exile, because, as you know, there can be no flight without exile. Finally,

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not see itself. On the contrary, the intellect functions, first, by observing things other than itself, so far as this is necessary; and this is what St. Dionysios the Great calls the intellect's 'direct movement.' Secondly, it returns to itself and operates within itself, and so beholds itself; and this is called by St. Dionysios the intellect's 'circular movement' [*On the Divine Names* 4.9]. This is the intellect's highest and most befitting activity and, through it, it even transcends itself and is united with God. 'For the intellect,' writes St. Basil, 'when not dispersed outwardly' — note that it *does* go out from itself; and so, having gone out, it must find a way to return inwards — 'returns to itself, and through itself ascends to God' in a way that is free from delusion [*Letter* 2.2]" (*Philokalia*, 4:336).

[9] See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 18.4: "And just as slaves, when they have been freed and have stopped serving their masters, turn their attention to themselves, thus, I think, the soul, once it has been freed from deception and slavery to the body, comes to an understanding of what is particularly its own and natural functions" (FOTC 58:59).

the inclination, the feeling, and the need for exile will lead me into isolation. Not psychological isolation, which is artificial, but real isolation, that of the spirit.

When I'm psychologically isolated, I say things like "nobody loves me," or "nobody cares about me," or "nobody wants me," and so on. Here we are, for example, all gathered together, and you say to yourself: "The Elder hasn't looked at me once! But he's looked at all the others." *That's* psychological isolation. It's a false state of mind, a lie, an illusion. And the soul can't be nourished with illusions, because anything false is a concealment of our real selves. It's a fig leaf.

Real isolation is spiritual: me and God alone. You cease to be of any importance to me. I'm not interested in whether you love me or think about me. I'm not even interested in whether you're here with me at all. I'm interested only in myself, not in the way we said at the beginning, but in the real sense: in order to discover my nakedness. Just me before God. Me and You, who are my God.

Real isolation of this sort is a basic requirement of the spiritual life: I can't become a saint unless I am alone, isolated. But in order to be isolated I must flee. I must attain the status of a stranger, an exile. Our aim is to know God and remain exclusively with Him. But this is extremely difficult because we've grown accustomed to perceiving things by means of our bodily senses, and now we have to learn to live and feel with our spiritual senses. The shift from the bodily to the spiritual requires nothing less than a conversion, because the awakening of our spiritual senses is the fruit of repentance (*metanoia*), which literally means a "change of mind" or "mentality." And in order for me to become a new creation, in order for me to undergo spiritual renewal and experience a complete and total change in my soul, I must experience and feel God as a living reality.

When we speak of "flight" — and mark this well — we are speaking primarily about an inner state of the soul, and not necessarily about physical withdrawal to a particular place.[10] Nevertheless, the tendency to enact a physical flight remains strong, because we are embodied creatures and experience the world in very palpable and physical ways. And it is difficult to feel alone, to experience isolation, when we are in the midst of a busy crowd, surrounded by noise, or otherwise entangled within the world. Thus we feel the impulse to retreat physically into a place of solitude and tranquility. This explains the attraction toward monastic life, which comes spontaneously to the soul when it thinks about God.

Of course, most people consider an attraction to solitude to be something dangerous, an indication of an unhealthy state of mind. But it is in fact the opposite that is true: unhealthy are those who have *never* contemplated flight from the world, for this means that they have never been seriously concerned about their souls. If they were to concern themselves with God for even five minutes, you can be sure that for four of those five minutes their thoughts would be taken up with the idea of going to a monastery. That's the way it is: the soul which takes thought for itself discovers that it loves repose. And it finds such repose in communicating with Him Whom it seeks, Whom it wants to discover, that is, with God. In the end, the soul may reject the idea of physical flight, but to the extent that it continues to live a life oriented towards God's kingdom, it can not avoid engaging in an interiorized, existential flight from the world.

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[10] See, for example, St. Basil, *Letter* 2 (to St. Gregory the Theologian): "There is but one escape (i.e., from the cares of the world): separation from the world altogether. But withdrawal from the world does not mean bodily removal from it, but rather the separation of the soul from sympathy with the body, and the giving up of city, home, personal possessions, love of friends, property, means of subsistence, business, social relations, and knowledge derived from human teaching; and it also means the readiness to receive in one's heart the impressions engendered there by divine instruction" (LCL 1:10-11); id., *Long Rules* 18: "Perfect renunciation consists in not having an affection for this life, remembering death, and not trusting in our selves. But a beginning is made by detaching oneself from all external goods: property, vainglory, life in society, useless desires, after the example of the Lord and His disciples" (FOTC 9:254). See also St. Niketas Stethatos, *On the Practice of the Virtues* 72: "I have heard people say that one cannot achieve a persistent state of virtue without retreating far into the desert. . . . But the desert is in fact superfluous, since we can enter the kingdom simply through repentance and the strict keeping of God's commandments" (*Philokalia*, 4:97-98). Note that Stethatos spent his entire life as a monk in the heart of Constantinople, the largest urban center of the entire Byzantine world.

Is it possible, then, for someone to live his life in the form of an existential flight? Can I, living in the world, live the kind of exilic life that we're talking about here? Of course I can. But even though such a thing is possible, it is fraught with the greatest difficulties. In any case, solitude and isolation are not, strictly speaking, undertaken for the benefit of God. It's of no importance to God whether I'm in a monastery or whether I'm in the world. What *is* important is to know the best way for me to hasten towards God. What is essential is that I exist in a state of voluntary exile, physical or otherwise, so that I am a stranger to the world and thus to a certain extent able to sense the presence of God.

With the necessity for separation — with this initial feeling of estrangement, this initial exile and isolation from others — comes yet another feeling: the realization that such conditions are not enough for me. I need God. I still don't have Him. And thus I am brought to the point where I need to seek Him. Do you remember the previous stage, the feeling of nakedness that leads to repentance? At that stage I was led to the desire for repentance, although I hadn't yet actually repented. Now I have simply advanced along the way of the cyclical path, drawing ever closer to myself. And it is that movement which brings me to the point where I need to seek God. But, as we've said, this is not the search itself, this is not the seeking, because the *need* to seek is one thing and the *seeking* is something else. The soul now confronts a question: How shall I seek God? And this, you see, constitutes the soul's combat, its titanic struggle to regain entry into paradise. I desire God. I proceed toward Him. I overcome the great difficulty of deciding between clothing myself with fig-leaves or saying: "My God, I'm naked. I've sinned against You. I want You." I've passed that stage, now I'm moving forward. Now I have conceived and bear within myself the idea of searching for God. How should I proceed?

The first thing we need to realize is that now there are two of us: me and God. Even so, God and I are still far apart. I have sinned, I have been separated from God, but now I am seeking Him. And He, too, is seeking me, because He loves me. Thus we have two movements: of God towards me, and of me towards God.

What can I do for God? Nothing. In fact, I can't even seek Him; I can't even repent. But what I *can* do is to struggle. This means that I can commit myself to a life of asceticism, to the practice of spiritual exercises.[11] And I will undertake such a commitment in a manner appropriate to my way of life, that is, depending on my situation, character, physical strength, psychological disposition, my history, my heredity, in terms of my gifts, and so on. Whatever role these factors play, there will be a commitment to asceticism.

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[11] Asceticism is rigorous (physical and spiritual) self-discipline as developed and defined within Orthodox Christian monasticism, beginning with the asceticism of Christ and his disciples in the New Testament, on which see Fr. George Florovsky, "The Ascetical Ideal and the New Testament," in his *The Byzantine Ascetic and Spiritual Fathers* (= Collected Works, vol. 10), 17-59. See also Bishop Kallistos Ware, "The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?" in *Asceticism*, ed. V. L. Wimbush (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-15. St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness* 112, cites "attentiveness and purity of heart" as examples of inner asceticism, and with respect to its outward forms mentions:

Earlier we said that pain begins with the experience of pleasure. Of course, we wanted only the pleasure, not the pain. But now I must embrace pain in order to regain true pleasure. Why? Because we were created for pleasure. God created Adam and Eve and placed them in a garden of "delights," for this is what the word "Eden" means (cf. Gen 2.15). In seeking pleasure, they were seeking what God had instructed them to seek and experience. However, they sought wrongly, and, instead of pleasure, they found themselves caught in the grip of pain. After that, they were given disfigured forms of the pleasures they had once enjoyed: disfigured because they were no longer divine but fleshly realities, like those, for example, given to them in marriage.

Beginning, therefore, from the pain into which I have fallen, my aim is to find what I was seeking, to arrive at the place of true pleasure, to regain the enjoyment of the delights of paradise. This means that I will make my own the very pain into which I unwittingly fell. And I will do this precisely because this is what I am capable of doing. I have neither God nor the strength for anything else. I am something that is broken. All I can do is feel pain. Thus I will take upon myself a life of asceticism, of spiritual struggle and exercise.

To what we have said about the nature of asceticism, let us now

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"fasting, chastity, sleeping on the ground, and vigils" (*Philokalia,* 1:181); cf. St. Ilias the Presbyter, *Gnomic Anthology* (*Philokalia,* 3:51-57); and St. Peter of Damascus, *The Seven Forms of Bodily Discipline* (*Philokalia,* 3:89-92). See also below, chap. 9, n. 28.

add this: asceticism is a way in which I, a human being, set about attracting the attention of God. You do the same sort of thing when you want the attention of the abbot: you make noise, knock on the door and shout: "Elder, Elder!" Others will dress differently or do other things to attract attention. We do similar things to attract the attention of God. Does God have need of such activity? I will say only this: it is something I can do, and God wants me to do what I can.

In a manner of speaking, then, asceticism is like putting on my best clothes. It's my preparation in order to seek, want, actively desire, love, and, finally, receive God. Even so, He and I are still separated by a great distance. What we're attending to now are the preparations, just as we would sweep the house in preparation for a visit by our spiritual father. Thus I give expression to my inner disposition by enduring the coldness and filth that is within me, by accepting my nakedness and acknowledging it before God. In doing this I express my desire for God. Asceticism is the way I cry out to Him.[12]

Of course, operative in all of these stages of the spiritual life is the presence of divine grace. What is divine grace? It is the activity of God. Divine grace is not the essence of God. I remind you, once again, that we're not speaking in the formal language of dogmatics or academic theology. All we're doing is charting the contours

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12. See St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 12.2 (On the Fourth Sunday of Lent): "As we learn from Moses, the Lord told Cain that *the voice of the blood of Abel cried out to Him* (Gen 4.8-10). In the same way, all the parts and members of our body suffering hardship because of fasting cry unto the Lord, and, joining their voice to the prayer of the faster, pray together with him" (*Homilies,* 1:136). See also below, chap. 9, n. 28.

of the soul's progression. We're narrating the story of our soul, outlining the stages of our spiritual struggle at its most practical level. At this point, however, it will be useful to speak with a greater degree of theological precision.

Divine grace is not God's essence, because God is *imparticipable* in His essence. This means that, in terms of His inner being, God is utterly transcendent and inaccessible to us. God is absolutely nothing that I could ever imagine, conceive of, desire, or comprehend. Whatever I can grasp and say: "*this* is my God," will *not* be my God, because God is not an object that can be grasped.[13] Instead I must *feel* God.

Here's an example of what I mean from the Gospel of John. Do you remember the passage concerning Thomas? *Eight days later the disciples were in the house again and Thomas was among them. The doors were closed, but Jesus came in and stood among them. 'Peace be with you,' He said. Then He spoke to Thomas, 'Give me your hand and place it in My side'... Thomas replied, 'My Lord and my God'* (Jn 20.27-28). Now it was Thomas' soul – and not his hand – which felt the truth of the words he spoke. It was his soul that received proof of the presence of God based on experience. And what was it that he saw? The divine energy.

The doors, it says, *were closed*. How, then, did the body of Jesus enter into the room? Through the keyhole? No, not through any hole in the door or any other opening, for the body in question was not material, even though it was still a body. It wasn't anything that I can understand, or see, or conceive of. Whatever I may imagine won't be the body that Christ had at that time. Even so, it was a body.

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[13] According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 234-235: "He who thinks that God is some thing that can be known does not have life, because he has turned from true Being to what he considers by sense perception to have being" (Malherbe, 115).

It follows, then, that divine grace, which is forever rushing towards me, is not the divine essence. It isn't God as He exists in His own being and nature. But it is nonetheless God. It is God's energy, God's activity. What I experience is God rushing and running toward me, coming forth to meet me. And even though this running is divine grace, and a union with God, it is not the final union. It is a preliminary union. What do we mean by this? I have given something to God that is of absolutely no significance to Him, namely, my asceticism, my pain. Why? Because I have nothing else to give Him. In response, God gives me what I am capable of receiving, what I'm able to contain within myself. In this case, He gives me an initial gift of illumination. And this illumination is participation in divine grace and thus a sharing in the life of God Himself. However it's not yet union with God, but rather communion, because now we are communicating with Him. It's an illumination.

Here's an example of what I mean. We've been living side by side for six months, and all of a sudden I say: "Ah! Now I understand — now I realize that I love her!" How does something like that happen? It's a flash of light, an internal illumination, a sudden opening of my heart and mind — a thousand different things — but until the moment when I say "Ah!", there's a sense in which God doesn't yet exist for me: union with Him has not yet occurred. God has been lost, but now I'm beginning to communicate with Him. To use another example, we can also say that it's like playing hide and seek. God runs after me, and I run after Him. And if, in this game that we play, we are not able to see God, it's not because God is absent, but because I am blind and cannot see Him.

I have, then, this flash of light, this illumination, which is an illumination of knowledge. What does "knowledge" mean here? It has to do, not with ordinary reason, but rather with our highest spiritual faculty — it's something more like spiritual understanding, except it's not exactly "understanding" either. It's a form of recognition, like when I sense the presence of my spiritual father, when I have the feeling that he's coming: "It's my Elder!" I say, and I run out to meet him. I knew it was him. I recognized the sound of his footsteps . . . I can hear him even now, coming up the stairs. Thus we're talking about a kind of knowledge or understanding that is actually a form of recognition. And that recognition, moreover, is already a movement, a drawing near on my part. When I realize that my elder is outside, ringing the bell and walking up the stairs, there's a sense in which I've already turned toward him, already approached him, already touched him. Before I see him I'm already embracing him, speaking to him, opening my heart to him. That is how I run to him, how my soul makes haste to be with him. It is the activity of my soul. It is not my soul itself, but the activity of my soul.

We have, then, the experience of illumination, which is communion with Christ. It follows that communion is progress towards God. We begin to unite with Him, reaching out our hands to Him, as it were, and intertwining our fingers with His. Recognition occurs. And even if I'm blind, I'll immediately recognize you by the touch of your hand.

At the beginning of this new stage, what do I recognize? Two things, which I will understand better in time, but which I begin to recognize now: the glory of God and His holiness, in contrast to my own nakedness and sinfulness. I am naked. He is clothed. God is clothed in holiness. I am nobody, a nothingness — but from this nothingness I discover an immediate point of contact, for this is the vantage point from which I can come to know the glory of God.

Thus we have before us the holiness and the knowledge of God. What does the "holiness" of God mean? It signifies God's transcendence, which is the source of His immanence and thus of His presence to all. What does "holy" mean? It designates something set apart that belongs to God. In this way, the holiness of God refers to whatever belongs to God Himself. It designates that which is beyond everything else. It is something that admits of nothing else, something utterly pure, unalloyed, and immaculate.

Holiness is a characteristic of the essence of God. God *is* Holy, and the energy of God is holiness, a radiance coming forth from the divine essence. It follows, then, that the glory of God is God's energy, it is God Himself. I myself do not know, and cannot see, the holiness of God. However, I acquire a sense of it in contrast to my own nakedness and by means of its manifestation within God's activities. For example, God is not susceptible to sin, therefore God is holy.

Moreover, the glory of God is a radiance, a reflection of His essence. It is not something made or created by God, but it is nonetheless real, for it is the presence of God Himself. Thus when we sense the holiness of God and His glory, what we are experiencing is real and truly exists. Moreover, God's holiness and glory are absolutely essential in order for us to celebrate the Liturgy. Whether we are clergy or laymen, we all assemble within the same church in order to celebrate one and the same Liturgy. However, if we do not have the feeling of God's holiness and glory, if I don't know how to see God's glory and form, then I am not able to celebrate with conscious awareness. In such cases I become a passive object. And this is why, throughout the Liturgy, we are constantly brought before the holiness and glory of God: *For You, our God, are holy, and You rest in Your saints, and to You we ascribe glory* *and the thrice-holy hymn.*[14] The same language is repeated during the chanting of the Cherubic Hymn: "God Who is enthroned amidst the cherubim and seraphim, the King of Israel, the only Holy One, resting in the saints . . . I entreat You Who alone are good." This is how I understand His holiness. This is how I draw water from the fountain of life, even though it appears to be so far away from me.

Seeing and feeling the holiness and glory of God, I begin to understand the nature of my own nakedness and nothingness. I understand that I am a sinner — that I am nobody, nothing, mere *dust and ashes* (Gen 18.27) — and thus I fall down at the feet of Christ, and that falling down will be the expression and confession of my nothingness. It is the vision of the glory of God, in other words, which enables me to see myself, to recognize my true self and to gain practical, experiential knowledge of my self.

For example, let's say that I've offended one of you. But you remain calm, and when I see your graciousness, and how readily you overlook my bad behavior, and how quick you are to forgive me, then I say: "What a rude and insensitive man I am!" When I see that you've forgiven my debt of 10,000 talents (cf. Mt 18.24), then I'll say: "What sort of person am I, who won't even give five *denarii* to someone else?"

In the face of God's glory and holiness, I acquire empirical, experiential knowledge of my self. This is what we meant when we spoke of the returning, cyclical movement around our selves. It is within us that the Kingdom of God will enter — not anywhere else (cf. Lk 17.21). Whatever may exist anywhere else is another matter entirely: it is not for me.

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[14] Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, *Prayer of the Thrice-Holy hymn.*

As we've said, this empirical knowledge that I've gained is a palpable vision of myself before God, as the result of which I see what I am. It is a revelation and examination of my innermost self; it is knowledge of that which is hidden within me. Through this experience, I uncover my passions, I uncover my weaknesses; I uncover the stench and the filth that is hidden within me, which I didn't even know existed. It is the consciousness, you might say, of my subconscious, which has now been revealed to me. It is the perception of my corruption and my weakness: the one through the holiness, the other through the glory, of God. Now I come face to face with my innermost self: I discover my subconscious and recognize that I am a corrupt man, a putrid being, something utterly ruined and dissolute.

At the same time, this recognition of my inner condition is the awakening of my free will. It also marks a difficult turning-point in my life, because my sense of, and interaction with, my self is now much more tangible and concrete. And this is why, as we stated earlier, we have the problem of whether I'm going to accept what I've discovered, or whether I'll run away and hide.

Now we're exactly on the razor's edge, and if we fall, our fall will be very great. It's the moment of truth: will I repent or will I not repent? It's the beginning of our life. It is here where I throw the dice.

This is the most critical turning-point in my life. If I reject the opportunity for spiritual growth that God has placed before me, I shall do so in an attempt to deny the truth of my inner corruption, to turn a blind eye to all the filth that I've discovered within myself, and seek to support and justify myself apart from God. However, that will disrupt my personal drama and recast me in the tragic role of a man pitted against his own self, who is in denial of his own self.

If, for example, I am pitted against you, our relations will always be difficult, and, indeed, intolerable. I'll never have any peace, and we'll either have to separate or learn how to love each other. However, I can't simply ignore the situation. Imagine, now, what happens when I am pitted against *myself.* It means that I am torn in two, that my kingdom has been divided (cf. Mt 12.25), and that my self is at war with my self. The crucial moment has arrived. From this moment forward, my central, ruling passion begins to emerge, a passion that will lead me to a kind of gallows. (What that gallows is, is another question.) But if we accept our selves, we will not try to hide or cover up the truth about who we are. Instead, we will desire to make continued progress and receive divine grace. And as we said earlier, to arrive at this point is itself the fruit of divine grace, which is now joined to our free will.

Previously we had the work of asceticism, which we described as an offering of what we were able to give to God at that particular time. I attract divine grace and divine grace descends. The time has now come for divine grace to be united with my own will. When this occurs, the union of my will and divine grace is expressed by a feeling of inner pain.

Here we must be clear: this is not the pain of asceticism that we mentioned earlier. That is something else. That was my own pain. This pain, on the other hand, is an ache for divine grace, for God. It is what the Psalmist means when he says: *My soul has thirsted for the living God* (Ps 41.2). Longing for God, my soul has melted or is melting. How do you melt from love? No matter what I say to you about melting from love, you won't understand what I mean unless you experience it: the feeling of love, of intense love, which makes you deny yourself and become a mere nothing in the arms of the other. And now it is God's love that is inviting you to entrust yourself completely to Him, to surrender your self — body and soul — so that it no longer belongs to you, but to Him. That's the pain of love: a languor, a melting that I feel, although without any trace of sorrow, without the feeling of what we call a "heavy heart."

Now, pay careful attention here: a heavy heart and a feeling of sorrow (internal sorrow, not external sorrow) are expressions of rejection; they are expressions of the denial of what I've discovered about my self.

Where there's a heavy heart, you will also find the attitude that says something like: "No, God. Stay where You are. Don't come any closer." Where there's sorrow, a heavy heart, and — another element — spiritual isolation, there you'll also find denial. That's where a new wall is being built, one that's likely to separate me decisively from God.

This is why sorrowful and isolated souls cannot delight in God. Will they be saved? *As through fire* (1 Cor 3.15). We don't know. It depends on different things. But that is another question. In any case, we're not talking about that kind of pain. To repeat: it's absolutely essential that these two elements are not found within us. When we experience spiritual isolation and a heavy heart, it means that we've turned our backs on God.

But as long as those two elements are absent, we can experience the melting, which is a thirst, an inner cry. Up until this point, our asceticism has been largely bodily, which was definitely worth something. It was the effort of my body for the sake of my soul, by kneeling, prostrations, and things like that. That was the joint effort of my body and soul, the whole person. But *this* is the cry of my spirit.

SECOND ASSEMBLY*

As we mentioned yesterday, our theme has a practical side, namely: how the soul actually experiences progression in the spiritual life. We considered the various stages through which the soul passes, but in order not to tire you, I will not repeat what I said about that yesterday. Permit me, however, simply to remind you that the soul must first feel that it has been exiled — it must feel the walls that surround it and separate it from God — it must experience, in other words, the state of rejection into which it has fallen, followed by the feeling of its own nakedness, the realization of its sinfulness.

When the soul has these experiences, it will reach a critical point and have to decide whether it's going to cover itself with fig leaves or uncover itself before God. In other words, whether it's going to hide from God, or say: "This is what I am, Lord: a naked soul."

If the soul accepts its nakedness, its sinfulness, the nothingness in which it lives, then it will also feel an urge towards repentance. This is not, however, the moment of repentance itself, but rather the moment of return, a cyclical movement of the soul around itself, taking proper thought for itself, so that it can return to the natural condition in which God created it.[15]

When the soul does this, a desire for escape will be born within it, a yearning for exile, a new state of mind focused on the quest for God. And even though such a soul is still too far away to be able to seek God, it can nonetheless experience two things: that which is proper to itself and that which is proper to God.

The first of these — that which is proper to the soul itself — is asceticism, which is a preparation for receiving God. Asceticism is the means by which the soul will cry out and attract the grace of God.

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* 28 May, 1973.

[15] See above, n. 8.

The second experience is God's grace, which presents itself to the soul as an illumination, a participation in the uncreated divine energy, and thus a real communication with God. Here we saw the first signs of communication experienced through contact with God.

In recognizing God, the soul begins also to recognize itself, to acquire actual, experiential knowledge and understanding of its innermost self. We experience, as we said, a bringing to the surface of the subconscious. The soul begins to recognize and understand what it has within itself, and thus we come to the second difficult turning-point, the fearful moment when the soul will either fall or be raised up. To fall means to try and cover up the subconscious, or to reject it and search for substitutes, to create the illusion of standing upright in order not to see ourselves as something falling.

If the soul negotiates this difficult turn successfully, then it will begin to travel on the road toward God. It will seek to cleanse its subconscious, to purify the depths of the heart. And this will express itself as pain, as a crying out, as a tear shed to God. The soul will again become aware of the need to seek God. However, the search for God has not yet begun. All of this is but the preparation for it: the search itself is still a long way off.

Nevertheless, the soul can now experience repentance, which, as we said, is not simply the opening of the gate of the soul — which in any case already took place when divine grace opened up the subconscious, manifesting that which was hidden — but rather the opening of the gate of heaven. Heaven opens and God descends.

This is what we were describing earlier when we spoke about breaking down the hardness of the heart, what the Apostle Paul calls a *circumcision of the heart, a removal of its fleshly covering* (cf. Col 2.11; Rom 2.28). And once that covering is stripped away, the soul is laid bare. God is now able to enlighten it, and thus we receive the first, essential gift of God: freedom.

What is freedom? Release from desires, liberation from passionate impulses and from every deception. It is, in other words, our emancipation from the unconscious, which to a certain extent has now been enlightened by divine grace. And now that we've been set free, we're able to fly. A slave can't fly, only a free person can. And now that I'm free, the path has opened up before me, and I can ascend the steps of God's love.

As I've said, we're merely casting glances at different aspects of our progression, without going into all the details. For example, we're not considering how the love of Christ is acquired. Let us assume, though, that we have acquired such love, and consider for a moment its relation to the soul's progress. The love of Christ enables us to *know* Christ. Until now, we've had no knowledge of God's love based on experience. All we had was a theoretical, intellectual knowledge, which is a human thing, very small and cheap, limited on all sides, whereas the important thing is what I experience within myself and make my own.

Experiential knowledge — love — is different from theoretical knowledge in at least one way that you can readily understand. It is one thing to "know" someone who is a stranger, and another thing to "know" someone who is your spouse. The two have nothing in common. Similarly, it's one thing for me to know what you're carrying in the street, and which appears to me to be a black bag — perhaps bearing a brand name or the name of a particular shop — and it's another thing for it to be my own, in which case I recognize it as one of my possessions, as belonging to me. That is the difference between theoretical knowledge and knowledge that comes from the love of God.

Knowledge of God is something I acquire through possession, through ownership: it is something that belongs to me. It is a knowledge based on communion of the heart and intellect. At such moments, the intellect is submerged within God and contemplates God from within. That is the heart's communion with God.

This knowledge moreover is a *theology*, because together my heart and intellect think about God from within. This is, as a result, a kind of *perichoresis.*[16] My intellect and my heart begin to delve into what is, in a manner of speaking, the inaccessible sanctuary of God, to enter deeply into His darkness, because for us God is darkness, something unknown (cf. Ex 20.21).[17]

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[16] Variously translated as reciprocity, co-inherence or interpenetration, *perichoresis* denotes either the interchange of human and divine attributes in the person of Jesus Christ, or the relationsip of mutual love among the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity, in both cases comprising a union without confusion or division, on which see St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 1.14: "The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling is without confusion," and ibid., 51 (2.7): "The two natures of the Lord are mutually immanent" (FOTC 37:201-202, 284). See also St. Maximos the Confessor, *Fourth Century on Various Texts* 19: "Revelation is the inexpressible interpenetration of the believer with the object of belief, and entails . . . participation in supranatural divine realities, and, as far as possible, identity with respect to energy between the participant and that in which he participates. This identity with respect to energy constitutes the deification of the saints" (*Philokalia*, 2:239-240).

[17] On the experience of union with God as entry into a state of "darkness," compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 162-167 (Malherbe, 94-96); St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On Mystical Theology* (Luibheid, 135-141); id., *Letter* 1 (ibid., 263); St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Theology* 84-85 (*Philokalia,*

There is, then, this *perichoresis*, and my knowledge now becomes a quest. I begin to search, to hunt. An amorous pursuit now unfolds between me and God, in the *gardens, at night, during the day* (cf. Song 3.12-15, 1.7, 3.1). And why do I pursue God? Because God pursues me. That, however, is another matter that does not immediately concern us — if we tried to deal with both at the same time, we would run the risk of failing to understand either.

But let us not forget that the spiritual life is something that's unified. If you analyze it — breaking it down into its various parts — you'll destroy it. If I dissect you in order to understand the workings of your body, I'll already have made a mess of you. You'll be dead. And in a certain way we're now dissecting and destroying the spiritual life. The spiritual life is an experience: nothing more. It is participation in the Holy Spirit. The moment we place it under a microscope, we reduce it to unintelligible fragments. Imagine if I were to put you under a magnifying glass to see what you were made of. How different you would seem! Gone would be your beauty, gone your value. Everything would be gone. I'd be looking at cells, blood, nerve fibers, something entirely different. You wouldn't be what I now see before me with my own eyes.

Thus, rather than illumine the progression of the soul in its fullness, we're actually destroying it by dividing it into parts. Let us

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2:133); St. Niketas Stethatos, *On the Inner Nature of Things* 51 (*Philokalia*, 4:171); St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines* 43 (*Philokalia*, 4:220); and St. Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 1.3.18 (Gendle, 35-36). In general, the Church Fathers delineate three stages or degrees in the soul's ascent to God, symbolized by Moses' experience of the light, the cloud, and the darkness: (1) illumination, which is the time of purification; (2) entry into the "cloud," which signifies contemplation of spiritual realities; and (3) entry into the "darkness" which represents the mysterious union of created man with the uncreated God.

therefore ask God's pardon for what we're doing, in the hope that we'll understand something from what's been said, because the spiritual life can only be understood by means of spiritual perception.

When I'm pursuing God in the way we mentioned just a moment ago; when I am acquiring knowledge of Him, communion with Him; when I'm entering His inaccessible sanctuary, into His darkness, into His gardens — to use the language of the Song of Songs (3.12-15, 1.7, 5.1) — what is it that I feel? An intense upsurge of both joy and pain. Pain, because I'm searching for Him, and joy because I'm *living* Him, and thus I am living in an upsurge of enjoyment and pleasure.

Do you remember what we said yesterday? Adam's pleasure led to pain, and now pain is all that we have. We begin our life with the experience of pain — which alone is uniquely ours — and proceed to what God gives us: an eruption of pleasure.

At this stage we experience both joy and pain. Together these make up what we call the "pain of the heart." As we said yesterday, this pain is a melting, a thirst. When you're really thirsty, you're crushed, ruined. You become a mere nothing. You feel exhausted. If someone doesn't bring you some water, you're going to collapse. That's what happens to the soul. Without God, the soul is not able to live — which does not mean that it no longer has a reason to live, but that it is *dead.* And this is why, from the moment when the soul comes to know God through its own experience, through what we called *perichoresis*, it will either live in Christ or die. There is no other alternative.

This thirst, then, this wasting away, leads the soul to experience a desire for death. Why? Because in this deceitful existence, the soul can only see God *as a dim reflection in a mirror* (1 Cor 13.12). Where's God? Where's my God? Though we desire it greatly, we cannot see

God with our whole being, we cannot grasp Him, or join ourselves to Him in body and soul, and thus the soul concludes that it must break, not only the casing of the heart, as we said before, but the whole outer sheath of the body, and emerge from it, so that it may be liberated and be alone with God alone.

The soul experiences this desire for death like a fully-formed embryo experiences the desire for birth: it wants to come forth, it must be born, because the nine months have been completed. It cannot remain inside any longer; it must come out, no matter what. This is the experience that the soul wants to live: a new birth.

The desire for death, which is a desire for spiritual birth, is an experience of liberation from corruption, time, and from space; it is a release from a life of spiritual poverty, misfortune, slavery, and beggary. In this life we are beggars, and we must beg for all that we have. However we are summoned to break down the barriers that keep us confined in our poverty; we are called to defeat death and attain the limits of incorruptibility, in order to be alone with God, to plunge into the boundless ocean of the love, happiness, and pleasure of God — to ravish God and be ravished by Him.

What are the signs that mark this point of the progression? How is it known, and how is it experienced? It is a rising above and beyond the limits of the soul, and thus the soul undergoes a movement beyond its proper boundaries, beyond its very life, into a realm of transcendence, to God Himself. It is a projection, no longer of the subconscious toward the conscious, but rather of the whole person toward the whole Divinity. It is a projection of human nature toward the divine hypostasis.

And just as the soul goes beyond its limits in order to encounter God, so too does God bend down toward the soul, abandoning His proper limits in order to give Himself to me, to surrender Himself to me.[18] Thus we have the *personal experience* of the *self-emptying* of the Word (cf. Phil 2.7) and of His birth within us.

Do you remember what we said yesterday? Whatever has taken place in the history of salvation — whatever was done by Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit — must also take place within me. That's what it means for me to participate in the life of God. For example, to the extent that I have *emptied myself* (cf. Phil. 2.7), I experience what the Mother of God felt when she said to the angel: *Let it be done unto me according to your word.* I experience, in other words, her total self-surrender to that which was beyond her capacity to understand. *How shall this be?* she asked; *How can I give birth, since I am a virgin and have not known a man?* Was there anything she could understand? The angel replied: *The Spirit will overshadow you and you will give birth* (cf. Lk 1.34-38). Did she understand anything? Nothing at all. That is what is meant by *Let it be done to me according to your word*, which means: "whatever you say, just as you said it. Even though I cannot understand it, let it happen just as you say."[19]

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[18] See St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* 4.13: "In a moment of ecstasy, the cause of all (i.e., God) comes to be outside itself by its providences for all beings; and being, as it were, seduced by goodness and affection and love, is led down from being above all, and transcending all is brought down to being in all" (Luibheid, 82).

[19] See Arch. Aimilianos, "Catechism on Prayer," 225: "My nature and the energy of His nature are united in one person. Not in the Person of the Word, but in the person of someone at prayer. And so, that which happened in Christ, through the virginity of the Mother of God . . . now happens in me through my virginal soul, in travail day and night and finally giving birth, so that . . . we shall become one person." Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 2.2: "What took place bodily in the case of the Virgin Mary occurs in every soul spiritually giving birth to Christ" (FOTC 58:11); St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Various*

Do you have a sense of the self-emptying, the self-surrender that occurs? In response, God says: "Be filled with My grace, My energy; be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit." And this now happens to me. The Divinity bends down over me. I now have a personal experience of the self-emptying of the Divinity, of the divine energy. As a result, the whole of my being receives the radiance, the effulgence of divine energy. This is my divinization, my union with God, in consequence of God's bending down to me.

How do I experience this? As an ecstasy. What did we say a moment ago? My life becomes transported to God, and to the extent that I am trans-ported, I am also ec-static. And what sort of experience is this? It is an *ek-stasis*, a "standing outside" of my nature. And this, let it be said at once, is an act of divine power. It does not mean that I've lost my mind. It's not a pathological phenomenon. It's something above and beyond the natural order. Now I experience the act of divine power. Now the hand of God, which is what acts, comes in. And I become a person acted upon by the power of God, and thus my experience of ecstasy is not, as we said, pathological, but rather a visionary state, an event, a reality, an experience.

I now have a true vision of God. I am outside myself, and I see God. This is a miracle, a divine phenomenon. And because it unfolds in a state of ecstasy, I experience a loss, a reduction of my

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Texts 8: "The divine Logos, who once for all was born in the flesh, always in His compassion desires to be born in spirit in those who desire Him" (*Philokalia*, 2:165); and St. Symeon the New Theologian, *First Ethical Discourse* 10: "Just as God, the Word of the Father, entered into the Virgin's womb, even so do we receive the Word in us, as a kind of seed. . . . We do not, of course, conceive Him bodily, as did the Theotokos, but in a way which is at once spiritual and substantial, and thus the One Whom the pure Virgin conceived we possess in our hearts . . . when, that is, our souls are virginal and pure" (Golitzin, 1:55-56).

physical senses; a loss of my will power and capacity for desire.[20] My soul is no longer, as it were, an arrow about to be shot, but one that has already been released from the bow. Remember where we started from. The soul is something that was shot like an arrow into the world. Now, however, that same soul *as spirit* — the capacity of my spirit, and not the power of my soul — is like an arrow that has been shot forth, sent flying, and transported to where God is.[21]

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[20] In a state of ecstasy, the natural faculties of the soul are suspended, but not the inner perception of the heart (or spirit/intellect); compare St. Neilos of Ancyra, *Discourse on Voluntary Poverty (to Magna the Deaconness)* 27: "The prayer of the perfect is the rapture of the mind and the total cessation of sensory perception, inasmuch as they speak to God by the *inexpressible sighing of their spirits* (cf. Rom 8.26-27), and this is why the Apostle Paul, when he was caught up to the third heaven, *'did not know if he was in the body or not'* (cf. 2 Cor 12.2). The same thing happened to him when he was *praying in the temple and entered a state of ecstasy* (cf. Acts 22.17-18) and heard the divine voice by means of the inner sense of his heart, for the sense of hearing along with all the other bodily senses ceases during the experience of ecstasy" (PG 79:1004B); St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* 1.5: "The union of divinized minds with the Light beyond all Deity occurs in the cessation of all intellectual activity" (Luibheid, 54); id., *On Mystical Theology* 2: "Renouncing all that the mind can conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he (i.e., Moses) belongs completely to Him Who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity of all knowledge" (Luibheid, 137); and St. Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 1.3.4-20 (Gendle, 32-38). See also Arch. Aimilianos, "Catechism on Prayer," 223-224: "In the end, the mind in prayer is caught up, you feel it being seized — *in the body or outside, we can't understand* (cf. 2 Cor 12.2) — and rises entirely towards God. . . . My ravished mind rises towards God, until it is finally united with Him Who ravished it and becomes God ravished in me."

[21] The soul as an "arrow" is a theme explored by St. Gregory of Nyssa in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs.* He states that the bride (who is a figure of the soul) is both struck by the arrow of God's love, and at the same time becomes herself

This is a living experience of the knowledge of God. It is an ecstasy, a movement toward God, and it takes place beyond the boundaries of my ordinary self. Does it take place *in the body or outside of the body?* (cf. 2 Cor 12.2). I don't know. Neither is it clear what I'm doing or what's happening to me. Do people in love understand what they're doing? Never. Only when they recover their senses do they understand. Of course, such a state of ecstasy conforms to the infinity of God: it is limited for us, unlimited for God.

Let's go on. How do I experience this? Note that the question is not: "How does God do this?", because how can we inquire into the ways of God? It's too difficult. Instead, we're talking about how we feel when our soul is propelled toward God, when, seized by God, it loves Him and knows Him.

We said that to know God, we have to love Him. And to love God is to know Him, and when we know Him, we are able to seek Him. For example, when you go to a shop to buy clothing, you already have an idea about what you want to buy. You look around,

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an arrow propelled toward God: "The bride praises the bowman for his good marksmanship because he hits her with his arrow. The bride says *'I am wounded with love'* (Song 2.5). These words indicate that the bridegroom's arrows have penetrated the depths of her heart. The archer of these arrows is Love (cf. 1 Jn 4.8), who sends his own *'chosen arrow'* (cf. Isa 49.2), the Only-begotten Son, to those who are saved, dipping the triple-pointed tip of the arrow in the Spirit of life. The tip of the arrow is faith, and by it God introduces the archer into the heart along with the arrow. As the Lord says: *'I and the Father are one; we will come and make our home with him'* (Jn 14.23). O beautiful wound and sweet blow by which life penetrates within! The arrow's penetration opens up, as it were, a door and entrance for love. As soon as the bride receives the arrow of love, the imagery shifts from archery to nuptial delight. . . . Earlier we said that the bride was the target; she now sees herself as the arrow in the bowman's hands. . . . God treats the purified soul as a bride and as an arrow aimed at a good target" (McCambley, 103).

see what's available, feel the fabric, and if it's what you want you'll say: "I want this one," and you'll ask for it. The same thing happens in the spiritual life. When we have our own experiences, and have acquired knowledge from them, then we know what we are looking for.

Our soul is now like an arrow in the sky. It was released from the bow, sent flying, and is headed toward God. That's how I feel my soul to be. But what about my heart? How does it feel? It feels like something overcome by the presence of the divine, which has surrounded it and occupied it. I have the experience of a heart under occupation. This is not a heart over which I myself have any power. This is not a heart that can petulantly pluck the petals off a daisy and say: "I love you God, I love you not." This heart belongs fully to God, having been completely taken over by Him; such a heart is saturated with God, and has the feeling of being occupied.

The intellect has the feeling of being ravished by God, *caught up to the third heaven* (cf. 2 Cor 12.2). The intellect is enraptured, caught up, as if it were no longer within the bounds of the body. Now I realize that my true being is not the body — which is dead without the soul — but is centered in the intellect. And now this intellect — this spirit of mine — is totally ravished. My spiritual substance, my spirit, has the feeling of someone possessed. What does it mean when I say "I possess" something? That I'm in complete authority over it. I can do with it whatever I wish. I now feel that my spirit is possessed by God. It follows, then, that I am God's possession. I have no power over myself, but rather I am under the direct sovereignty of God.[22]

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[22] See St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 4: "When the mind is exalted above created things, the body also takes leave of every movement and sensation apart from its

Now that I have the sense of being possessed by God, two things follow: a sense of liberation from the world, and a feeling of security. Let us consider each in turn. Being caught up in the reality of God, the reality of the world ceases to exist for me. I spontaneously renounce all things. Where is the world? Where are the people? Where are my desires, my self will? These things no longer seem to exist for me. If someone grabbed you by the throat and started strangling you, you'd immediately forget everything else. Something of equal intensity is occurring here.

Do you see now how our purification, our cleansing from the things of the world, takes place? Everything we said up until now, all the stages of the soul's progress, have been leading up to this point. But the question is not how one gets there. It's like the arrow. On its own, it will stay where it is. But it has the potential to be drawn across the bow, sent flying, and soar into heaven. And that is God's business. It's an operation of the divine. This is why those who desire to be spiritual must unhesitatingly abandon themselves to the power of God. When they do, God will snatch them up and carry them to heaven, transporting them there by His grace.

The response of the soul, as we said, is to reject everything that is outside of God. Nothing else exists anymore. The soul has rejected all things, and it has done so freely, without any cost, because it sees all things as alien. And this includes love. Not the love of God, for those who love God love all things. Love in Christ is

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natural vitality . . . *'whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth,'* and he heard *'unspeakable words'* (2 Cor 12.2, 4). Paul did not hear audible sounds, nor did he see a vision composed of the corporeal images of sense perception, but it was by intuitions of the understanding, being in rapture, while his will had no fellowship with the body" (*Ascetical Homilies*, 34).

one thing, but the love which the soul now rejects is something else: it's a passion, a weakness. Now, however, none of that exists for me. I've rejected everything. Now we've finally arrived at the alienation that we spoke about earlier.

In the second place, I am conscious of a deep sense of security. Heaven is something familiar to me now. God has ravished me. I can taste God. I've rejected everything else. I am secure. I'm in the embrace of God, in the bosom of God. I'm bent down over Him and He's bent down over me. We're like two people in love: united.

As a result of this, however, the soul is confronted with an antinomy, a contradiction. What happens at this stage? Do I see God? Do I love God? Here now is the antinomy, a certain tension, a sense of distance, the reason why the soul wished to die. But it hasn't died yet. Only after death will the antinomy be resolved, and not even then, but only after our resurrection, when we shall be made perfect as a Church, as the Body of Christ, when we shall all become one.

So I see Christ and I don't see Him. I see Him because I am in His embrace. I don't see Him because I'm in ecstasy, because I'm still conditioned by boundaries. I haven't yet become pure spirit. I have not yet been perfected.

Remember what we said yesterday: What I see now and what I shall see in the next life are as different as an image of the sun from the actual sun; as an image of the sky from the sky itself; as your own photograph, of you whom I love, differs from you yourself, when I have you beside me. That's how much the two things differ, and that's why I both see Christ and yet don't see Him.

And this, as we've said, is characteristic of a state of ecstasy. When you're beside yourself, when you've gone beyond yourself, you don't understand what you're doing. You feel and yet you don't feel. Why? Because your being is in ecstasy: you live and yet you don't live. We live, on the one hand, because we are united to life itself, to Christ. But on the other hand we don't live, because as you know there can be no life without freedom. Life without freedom isn't human. Anyone who isn't free — especially inside himself — is dead. Whoever is not free is not fully human.

To the extent that we are possessed by Christ, to the extent that Christ has conquered us, we are no longer free. We ourselves have already subjected our freedom to slavery: we gave it up. And to the extent that we're not free, we're not really alive. We have surrendered our freedom to God, and He in turn has consecrated it: He has sanctified us.

Please pay attention to what we're saying now. We have given our freedom to God. And what has God done in return? He has consecrated us. What does "consecrated" mean? It designates something that belongs exclusively to God. And since it belongs to Him, He can do what He likes with it. I have no say in the matter. But at the same time whatever is consecrated to God moves about in God's space without any question or problem concerning its freedom. It follows, then, that we're totally free, since we've become His and are living the life that we have always desired. We're enjoying what our heart had been longing for when it realized that it had been exiled from its real life. We surrendered our freedom and received consecration. We live and yet we don't live. One kind of life — which was really a death — has ended, and a new life has begun. We experience what the Apostle Paul meant when he said: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me* (Gal 2.20). Now do you understand the meaning of this? We live, and yet we no longer live, because Christ lives in us. I have the overwhelming sense that *Christ lives in me.* And you can see that this is not something abstract or theoretical. You understand that it cannot be explained solely on the basis of rational categories.

Have you understood this? I don't know. But I think that you can see the path that we have to follow in order to arrive at the same point as the Apostle Paul when he said: *Christ lives in me*, which means that Christ is everything.

Do you remember what we said earlier about attracting divine grace? Now it is we who are attracted by Christ. We have surrendered ourselves to Him. We no longer live for ourselves, we are no longer focused on ourselves, having given up our freedom and our old way of understanding things, in order to be identified with God. And now God takes me by the hand and pulls me along wherever He wants to take me (cf. Ps 72.22).[23] I'm a prisoner of divine love

What takes place after this? What goes on in this state of living with Christ? The answer is simple: "I know only one thing: that I know nothing."[24] Deep down I understand one thing: that I don't understand anything. What are we able to understand? And *how* are we able to understand, being limited, finite, and bereft of direct spiritual perception? And we find ourselves in this situation because we have entered the realm of the Spirit prematurely, that is, before death, and for this reason "I know only one thing: that I know nothing." All I understand is that now Christ Himself is drawing and attracting me to His love. And all I want is for this not to stop. I want this ravishment to continue, this feeling of total freedom that I experience in God.

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[23] The image of the soul taken by the hand and being drawn toward God alludes to Christ vigorously grasping the hands of Adam and Eve in the iconography of the Anastasis, see Arch. Aimilianos, "Behold, I Make All Things New." In this sermon, the Elder discusses Christ's descent into Hades, and states that what the "souls experienced in Hades (i.e., during Christ's descent), we too can also experience. I don't think there is anyone who has not felt God, from the time he was a child, take him and hold him by the hand. God has truly held us by the hand and taught us how to walk in life." See also below, chap. 2, n. 6, and chap. 5, p. 144.

[24] This classic statement of Socratic ignorance is preserved among the fragments of Ariston of Keos, ed. F. Wehrli, *Lykon und Ariston von Keos* (Basel: Schwabe, 1968), frg. 14.7, line 9. See also, Plato, *Apology* (The Trial of Socrates), where this theme is discussed at length (20b-23c).

And again we come back to this terrible contradiction of ours. We are human beings clothed in flesh. Just when I realize that "I know only one thing," and "desire only one thing" — namely, that this situation should never cease, and that I should never turn away from it — in that very same moment I realize that it has already slipped through my fingers. The arrow, in a way, has returned to its point of departure. Love feels both the retreat and the attraction of the presence of God. This is why the soul wants so much to die, because then it will no longer suffer the withdrawal and cessation of these wonderful experiences. And that is why it says: *When shall I depart and be with Christ? When at last?* (cf. Phil 1.23).

Just when we say: "My God! Let us be like this always!" (cf. Mt 17.4; Mk 9.5), the feeling of God's embrace is lost, and the soul realizes that it's in a cell, or somewhere in the world, or that it's a student at the university, or a poor little monk, or anyone at all in a condition of loss, living in a monastery, in the world, at work, in chastity, or in marriage.

We're at the point where we've recognized God. But we have not yet arrived at union with Him. Ecstasy in this instance is not a question of being pulled outside of our selves, but is rather a transfer, a transposition of our whole being. What, then, does the Christian feel who has loved Christ, recognized Him, and arrived at this point? What is life like for a person who experiences both the intensity of

God's presence and His absence? In his everyday life, he experiences undisturbed tranquility, a sense of peace, a sense of love, and a feeling of security. But there is something else: his whole existence has an element of dispassion about it. What do I mean by this?

The ordinary person, or as we say, the "normal person" — who in reality is abnormal — is in fact a fallen person who exists in a state contrary to nature. And because we've learned to regard the unnatural as natural, the state of ecstasy appears irrational, having something absurd about it — absurd, that is, from a human point of view (cf. 1 Cor 1.18-21). But those who belong to Christ are full of peace, joy, and have a deep sense of inner security. They enjoy a certain freedom from temptations and negative thoughts: they do not fantasize or indulge in vain and foolish imaginings. We, on the other hand, go to say our prayers, and our mind is full of such thoughts, like arrows darting through our mind: "I hope I don't fail my exams tomorrow." There! The thought has entered, along with all that follows in its wake. But the person who has attained to God is no longer a prisoner of his imagination, no longer subject to negative thoughts. He is, in a word, dispassionate.

It's all over. Finished. You don't have thoughts like that anymore. You no longer have temptations, you no longer indulge in fantasies, you don't even have the possibility to sin, because God doesn't sin, and you're completely overwhelmed by His grace (cf. Jn 5.14; 8.11). You are dispassionate, free from the passions. At the same time, however, you experience a terrible passion, namely, the passion of Christ, which, again, seems utterly absurd and irrational because it's so intense: it's something that is *not of this world* (cf. Jn 18.36). Thus we experience our dispassion, our inner peace, and our joy not without an element of passion: the terrifying passion of Christ.

This situation — your passion enfolded within the passion of

Christ — is what conveys you from earth to heaven. While you're here on earth, you live completely in heaven! This passion of ours — as one of the saints says about prayer — raises you up while you're still on earth and places you within the region of heaven, "in the presence of God, Who is over all."[25] We live now in the presence of God. He who rules over the universe: there He is! And it is Christ's passion that has placed you there.

This, then, is the daily experience of the man or woman who lives in Christ. To all appearances, they live their lives just like everybody else. They work alongside us. I sit at my desk and go about my work, and they're sitting and working at the desks around me. And while I'm doing so, I'm thinking about the little pleasures in my life. But they aren't thinking about anything, they are free of such thoughts, experiencing instead the passion of Christ. But nevertheless they're just the same as I am. They talk to me: "Hello. How are you? How's the family?", and so on, but at the same time, at that very moment, they have Christ living within them. They live in the same world as we do, breath the same air, are confronted with the same basic temptations, but they no longer have within themselves the element of sin. Everything like that has been overwhelmed inside them. As we said earlier, they've been taken over by the grace of God. And they live that life in the utmost calm. The passion of Christ has become their daily experience.

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[25] See St. Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Chapters on Prayer* 19: "Contemplation purifies the mind, while prayer presents it naked before God" (*Philokalia G*, 4:307); and St. Theoleptos of Philadelphia, *Discourse on the Hidden Work of Prayer*: "Prayer restores the unity of the soul formerly divided by the passions, enabling it to dwell in God. First it removes from the soul all the disfigurements of sin, after which it inscribes within it the forms of divine beauty, presenting the soul to God" (ibid., 4:9).

But even so, such passion, such beauty, such a life, is nothing for them. It's normal. It's their bread and butter, as one might say. But can you live on nothing but bread and butter? No. And thus they seek greater ecstasies and visions of God. They seek, in other words, what they lost when they said: "Lord, let me stay here forever," which was the very moment they fell.

We recognize, then, that our life is marked by these moments, times, and periods when we are raised up to God. We have then – how can one express it? – these *surgings* of the soul. It's like when water reaches a hole in the pipe, at which point it bursts forth and jets upwards.[26] In the same way, those who live in God have their surgings, their ecstasies, the upward jettings of their soul and intellect soaring aloft toward God.

There is thus a basic movement, an alternation between earthly life and the surging of the soul into the region of heaven, which enables the soul to acquire familiarity with the divine. Heaven and God Himself become familiar to us already in this life. What I mean is something like this: when I came here today I was a stranger, and they gave me this chair and I sat down on it. I could hardly have refused, because we're still not on close terms. But if I come here fifteen, twenty times, I'll come in by myself, without even bothering to knock, and once I'm inside, I'll do whatever I want, as if it were my own home. That's familiarity.

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[26] Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 6.2: "Let us assume that water pouring from a source is divided into various streams, and is thus of no use for farming, because the division makes it weak and sluggish. If anyone, however, could bring these streams together, and collect what was previously scattered, he could use the collected water for many practical and helpful purposes. It seems to me that this is also true with the human mind: if it flows in all directions, it scatters itself by running towards what is pleasing to the senses, and has no worthwhile force for its journey to the good. But if it was collected unto itself, brought together, it would move with its own natural energy and nothing would prevent it from surging upwards and fastening itself upon the truth of reality. Just as water in a pipe, when constrained by force, often goes straight up, unable to flow elsewhere, even though its natural movement is downward; so, also, the human mind, being constrained from all directions by self-control, as by a kind of pipe, will be taken up by the nature of the movement to a desire for what is above, there not being any other place for it to run to. It is never possible for what has been put into eternal motion by the creator to stop and to use its motion for useless purposes once it has come to know the truth" (FOTC 58:30).

Through our repeated visits to the region of heaven, we acquire, as we said, divine familiarity. We return, in other words, to the way things were before the fall. In paradise, Adam, Eve, and God spoke with one another like friends. How beautiful! Just think what conversations they had lasting until late in the afternoon, Adam and Eve together with Christ! As the sun was setting, or as it was rising, or at other times in the presence of the beasts of the forest and the fish in the river – there were four rivers there, teeming with life, and above them the birds of the air, angels – everything! What superb days they must have spent with God, what marvelous walks they'd have taken together! And that's exactly what the soul can now experience and enjoy.

When I come here, what do we do? We exchange the usual formalities. "How are you? How are things going? Is that your brother sitting over there?" As I said, formalities. But when I gain confidence, my questions will become more direct, more searching. I'll begin to communicate with your heart, and I will come to know the secrets of your home.

Now, in very much the same way, I begin to enter into the secrets of God. But these are not the first revelations that we spoke of at the beginning, for those are something else. Since I have been granted familiarity with the divine, God reveals Himself to me in my intellect. Now I begin to enter into the mysteries of the divinity; now I begin to understand the doctrines of the Church. The Holy Trinity is no longer something ill-defined and obscure. I am no longer unclear regarding the self-emptying of Christ (cf. Phil 2.7). However, this does not mean that I am now capable of explaining to you what the Holy Trinity is. I am not able to do so, nor would you be able to understand me if I could. At this stage in the soul's progression, my understanding of the Holy Trinity is directly revealed to me by God Himself. I receive a revelation of the Holy Trinity. I receive a revelation of the mysteries of God, of the depths of God. Whether these are hours or days or fleeting moments, they are moments of revelation, moments of life lived intimately with God. And if you could, you would give the whole world in exchange for such a moment: it would be more than worth it.

Shall we continue? I don't think we're able to go any further. Let us conclude.

We've seen the progression of the soul from the moment it realizes it's in exile, until the moment it tastes the love of God. From that point on, the soul, loving God, prays continuously and remains in Him. We considered our ordinary, everyday moments as well as the moments of ecstasy. Will we ever attain such ecstasy? I can't say. But it's a possibility that is within the reach of each and every one of us.

In place of a conclusion, let me share with you two examples of what we've been discussing.

Someone — let's say he was a monk, someone dedicated to God — left his monastery. He went off to pray, off into the distance. He went out through the fields, into the forests, seeking God and crying out to Him. The others missed him. They didn't know where he was and they shouted for him. They didn't find him. But he, crying out and shedding torrents of tears, and allowing his soul to reach out to God, entered a cave. There, in the darkness of the cave, through interminable nights, he knelt in prayer. And this kneeling was his self-emptying, it was his "bending down over God" that we were talking about, a falling on to God.

He prayed continuously, whether *in the body or outside the body*, he couldn't tell (2 Cor 12.2). Forty days went by. The others eventually found him. They shook him and realized that he was entirely fragrant, but he himself did not move. His soul had departed. He was, as we would say, dead. But anyone with spiritual vision would say that he was finally alive. He had ascended to eternal life. In this life he did not find what he was seeking: the vision of God. But now his soul lives with God and gazes upon Him endlessly.

A second example: there was a monk who was a *man of spiritual desires* (cf. Dan 10.11). He left his monastery in order to dwell in a cave, where he prayed to God. The sun rose, the sun set. Outside, life went on as usual: peddlers shouted in the streets, farmers tilled the fields, children strove in the schoolyards, while the aged grew weary and slept. But he wasn't aware of any of it. He was living in eternity. Kneeling there, in the darkness of the cave, he was praying to God.

Forty days later, the others, who had been extremely worried, found him there. They saw his ecstasy; they saw that his heart had been transported. And that which they beheld, which was so extraordinary, so heavenly, was present here on earth, down here in this world.

"Is he alive? Maybe he isn't," thought the person who found him, and went to touch him. The startled monk shook himself at once. "Why did you bring me down?", he complained, as if he'd just woken up. Was he sleeping? No. His intellect had been united with God. When they touched him, it caused his intellect to return, and he realized that he was in a cave, and that next to him was a living human being — in reality a dead man — the man who had shaken him, and that's why he said: "Why, why did you bring me down?", for he had been "above," with God.

If we wish, we can, on the one hand, remain on earth and enjoy such intimacy with God so that even the slightest touch would make us say: "Why did you bring me down?" On the other hand, we may wish to fade away like the monk in the first story, who left his body so that his spirit might forever gaze upon God. Wouldn't either be worth all our effort? Either the one or the other: leaving our bones here on earth, or living here but being with God.

It seems to me that this is the reason why God cast the soul into the storm of life, and consigned it to the hell of fallen existence when it sinned: so that it may begin to re-acquire these experiences. When we feel that we're in exile, when at some point we feel that we're living without God, let us recall these moments. Let us desire a life such as this.

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(Response to a question that was not recorded)

Divinization is a continuous act, a dynamic activity. It's not something that happens once and for all. Divinization is a dynamic state of potential, which is realized and accomplished progressively, and which will be completed eschatologically, in the next life.

Thus, when my life is perichoretically joined with God — as we said earlier — when my soul jets upwards, then my ordinary, everyday moments will participate in, will become experiences of, the passion of Christ, and that passion will itself be a search for Christ. But there is something else. These spiritual leapings and revelations mean that I have found God, that I have conquered God. It follows, then, that in the seeking is the finding: to seek for God is already to have found Him.[27] This is my everyday experience.

The moments of our life are moments of quiet, calm, joy, and of the passion of Christ, during which we have *unceasing prayer* (cf. 1 Thess 5.17). My soul has learned how to pray without any prompting on my part, since it has become acquainted with God, thinks about Him and loves Him. I don't need to say: "My soul, pray now. You have to say the Jesus Prayer five hundred times." No. My soul has learnt by itself to pray without ceasing.

But be careful here. This is not a question of praying incessantly as the result of force or effort; it is not prayer because we "must" pray (remember what we said about "must"! It's the beginning of failure!), but because we can do nothing else. Since it has tasted God, the soul prays spontaneously, and prayer is now an expression, the offspring, initially, of love for God, and then of communion and union with God.

Prayer is what I do because I love God. If you love someone, you want to communicate with that person. And thus I seek to communicate with God, because right now I'm here on earth, in this ordinary life. Because, as we said, prayer ceases when we ascend up there. There I'm taken over, occupied by God. There He reveals Himself, He sets us aflame, His rays encircle us, we are saturated with His light and we have become what He is. When a piece of iron is placed in the fire, it will eventually be transformed into fire: that's how I become. There, prayer is ecstasy. But here, where I'm in my right mind — to put it in impoverished, human terms — here I pray because that is how I express my love for God, that is how I express my communication and union with God.

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[27] Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on Ecclesiastes* 7.5: "*There is a time to seek, and a time to lose* (Ecc 3.6). What should we be seeking? The Lord, as it is written: *Seek ye the Lord, and be strengthened; seek His face continually* (Ps 105.4); and again: *Seek ye the Lord, and when ye find Him, call upon Him* (Is 55.6). Thus we know what we should be seeking, and that the finding of it is itself a continuous seeking, for the seeking and the finding are not two different things" (ed. GNO 5:400-401).

It follows, then, that this love of mine is no longer an activity of the intellect, but rather an activity of the whole person. This is why we say that one should "pray from the heart," which means that the whole person should pray, the whole person should be elevated to God. That is what prayer is.

2. ON THE "STATE THAT JESUS CONFERS"*

> "Continuity of attention produces inner stability; inner stability produces a natural intensification of watchfulness; and this intensification gradually and in due measure gives contemplative insight into spiritual warfare. This in its turn is succeeded by persistence in the Jesus Prayer and by the state that Jesus confers, in which the intellect, free from all images, enjoys complete quietude"
>
> St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness and Holiness*[1]

My beloved children, how marvelous was today's Gospel lesson! It's one we've heard many times and experience continuously, especially during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. As we journey through the desert of life, it is only natural that our thirst should draw us to the Liturgy, because the Divine Liturgy is a sumptuous table set in the open air, such as that which the Lord has spread before us today.

What did we hear in the Gospel? Jesus gathered the people together. Why? Because the Apostles told Him *they have nothing to eat* (cf. Mk 6.36; Mt 14.15). Thousands of people, who had come *from every town* to see Jesus (Mk 6.33), would have gone hungry, and so the Lord had them *sit down in groups* on the ground (Mk 6.40), in order to satisfy their souls. They had *gone forth into the wilderness to see Jesus*, and He *gathered them all together* (cf. Mk 6.35; Mt 14.15).

The Divine Liturgy, my beloved, is precisely this *going forth*; it is a movement from one place to another, which we enact continuously. It is also a *sitting down in the open* in order to eat. It is, first of all, a kind of exodus. But from where? The people mentioned in the Gospel went forth from their *towns and villages* (Mk 6.33; Mt 14.13), but we come forth from ourselves, as well as from the places in which we live. We leave one kind of place, and come to another, which is different from the one we left. And who among us, upon entering a church, does not sense that there is something special here? Who does not know that to come here means to leave all else behind? And this can be seen by the fact that, if an inappropriate thought enters our mind while we're here, we immediately want to dismiss it. And even if we're unable to, we recognize it as something foreign, something that has intruded into the space of our soul, something that has slipped past our guard and entered into us.

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* A sermon preached to his spiritual children in the Church of St. Andrew, in the Patisia district of Athens, on 21 February, 1975.

[1] *Philokalia*, 1:163, no. 7.

We enter the church, then, when we go forth from ourselves in power, in substance, and in truth, leaving behind all our sins, our inclinations, and our aspirations. To enter the church means to leave outside all those things that make up our life in the world. That which exists is God (cf. Ex 3.14), but that which is ours, and which alone belongs to us, is our sin, our self will, and our desire. Apart from God, the self is something non-existent, even though it is, and remains, the creation of His hands, the breath of His first blessing (cf. Gen 2.7).

When we enter the church, we leave behind, not simply the things we see, but even the things for which we hope, because the latter in particular occupy a central place in our lives. Even though the things we hope for are not currently in our hands, we live as if they already were, feeling them intensely, as if we could run our fingers through them, lay hold of them, and possess them. In general, the intensity of our feelings about such things assumes the character of an actual experience, and we must leave that behind, along with all that we see.[2]

And what we "see" is everything we encounter in the course of the day: things seen by the eyes of the body as well as those of the soul — which are much more perceptive. The things we "see" are all the things we experience, which stir us up, unsettle us, occupy our minds, give us pleasure, and lift our spirits. When our eyes fall upon them, they elevate us, but only to a place within the visible world: never beyond it.

In leaving behind everything we see, we come forth from that which constitutes our place of exile. This is the new exodus undertaken by the children of God every time they assemble and unite themselves to Christ in the sacred space of the church.

Having left everything behind, where do we find ourselves? *In the open air*, as befits people *close to God* (Wis 16.9; cf. Lk 21.31).[3]

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2. See Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 115: "The moments occupied by pleasure . . . strictly speaking are perhaps rare, but keep our nature in tension long before they are actually experienced. Man spends most of his life waiting for and seeking pleasure. This is the fruit of the passions, an unceasing manifestation of the passions in us."

3. On this phrase, compare St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Psalm 5*: "The Psalmist says: *I shall stand before You* (Ps 5.3), not in any physical sense, but by means of my good deeds, for that is what it means to be close to God" (PG 55:65, line 19); St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Glaphyra on Exodus* 3: "He Who by nature is far from us, and close to God the Father, became our perfect High Priest, so that, through Him, we too may be close to God" (PG 69:524, lines 24-27); id., *Commentary on Ps 41*: "The Apostle Paul says that those Israelites who repent desire to be close to God through faith in Christ" (PG 69:1001, lines 23-26); id., *Commentary on Ps 72*: "*Those who are far from You shall perish* (Ps 72.27), not because they are far from God in terms of spatial distance, but in terms of prayer, knowledge, and manner of life. Sinners and the wicked are far from God, whereas the

Why do I say *in the open air*? Because, looking around the church, we feel that we're standing in heaven, and heaven cannot be considered a closed space.[4] And this is why Christ chose the desert as a place for prayer: precisely because its endless expanses and tremendous openness symbolize heaven itself. The desert, moreover, stands in contrast to the world: it contains no worldly pleasure, it gives you no earthly delight, and it offers you no fleshly repose. Heaven is something like that.

It follows, then, that no one can live in the desert if he's still seeking to satisfy his own desires, if he is still anxious to realize his own hopes. You ask God to satisfy your desires, and, when He doesn't, you think He's turning a deaf ear. You ask God to realize your hopes, and to your dismay they remain elusive. You ask God to deepen your religious feelings, only to discover that He keeps Himself at a distance. Why? Because in reality those things are only

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righteous are close to Him" (PG 69:1185, lines 16-25). See also Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 6.15.121 (PG 9:344D-345A).

[4] Note that in Orthodox iconography, sacred events are never depicted within closed, confined spaces, even if historically they took place indoors. Thus the Annunciation, the Last Supper, and Pentecost (which all took place indoors) are depicted "outdoors," often set before schematic clusters of buildings and other architectural forms, or simply within a field of divine, golden light. This iconographic tradition is deeply rooted in mystical experience, such as that described in the *Life of St. Symeon the New Theologian*: "Once, when he (i.e., St. Symeon) was in his cell, in a state of pure prayer, his mind was illuminated, and it seemed to him as if he were outside, in an open space. Although it was night, a light like the dawn began to shine from above, and his dwelling place and everything else vanished from sight. He had no sense of being indoors. The light continued to increase, becoming like the sun at midday, and he felt himself standing in the midst of it" (ed. Irénée Hausherr, *Vie de Syméon le Nouveau Théologien* [Rome, 1928], 92-94 = chap. 69).

about you, and not God, and thus they constitute the closed space in which you are confined; they are the place out of which God wants to lead you. Now, however, we find ourselves in the *open air* like that crowd of thousands, people *close to God*, close to the Lord. As for me, I'm blind, but I'm here too. I'm paralyzed, but nevertheless I'm here. I have no wings, I'm confined to the earth, but I'm here too, *close to God.*

What does it mean to be *close to God*? Think for a moment: can you be close to an icon and not be moved to venerate it? Can you be close to a fire and not be warmed? Can you be close to the light and not be illumined? Of course not. How, then, can you be *close to God* and not become godlike? How can you stretch out on God's open spaces and not be raised up to the heights of His grandeur?

It follows, then, that after our exit from the world, we find ourselves *close to God.* We do not, however, find ourselves *before the face of God* (cf. Ex 33.11). Why? Because, for the most part, the eyes of our soul and body (which are both earthly) do not see God: they only *seek* Him. In the darkness broken by the brazen lamps, we seek Him, but we do not *see* Him. And that is the tragedy of human existence: we see everything except that which truly exists. All creation, which had a beginning and which will come to an end, falls under our gaze, which means we see things that, in reality, have no independent existence.[5] The tragic figure of man does not see that which alone truly exists: the *One Who Is* (cf. Ex 3.14), and Who is always with us.

That is what it means to be *close to God.* And when we enter into the open spaces of the church, we immediately experience a particular feeling, a feeling which confirms for us that here, in this place, our Helper is at hand. He is invisible, but you feel Him, as if He were rushing toward you, as if you could hear the sound of His breathing. He is your Helper, the One Who can deliver you, Who can redeem you, Who alone can satisfy your insatiable soul, which is forever being gnawed by hunger. You are *close to God*, and God is invisibly present. But, you may ask, where is He? Who can see Him?

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[5] These themes are discussed by St. Basil, *Hexaemeron* 1.3 (FOTC 46:7).

If you wish to see God, my beloved children, there's only one thing to do: go to church filled with longing to see His face, filled with divine and heavenly desire to be able, somehow, to feel the presence of your Helper and Defender. When you do this, your soul will experience an initially strange feeling: it is God touching your heart. And what will the heart do in response? Will it laugh and rejoice? No. It will be filled with a blessed, godly grief, and begin to weep and lament. In the presence of the Lord, you'll feel your heart — which is like a useless sack — filling to the brim with the sense of its own emptiness and thereby overflowing with tears. And these tears will be its secret cry, saying: "Where are You, Lord? Have mercy on me."

"Where are You, Lord?" That is the heart's first cry. But it immediately realizes that it's not able to see God, and that, if it did, it would lose its life (cf. Ex 33.20). Correcting its mistake, it continues: "Grant me Your mercy, You are my mercy, Yours is mercy, I am Yours, and You alone can have mercy upon me; You alone can bring me up from the pit of tribulation, from the depths of Your absence and my absence — Your absence from me, and mine from Your own spiritual life."

When the soul begins to cry — and it cries to God, my beloved, very easily indeed, because God, in a sense, is the soul's only surviving relative, and what could be more natural than that it should seek Him, and that it should cry when it realizes that it cannot see

Him? When you allow your soul to cry, when you reject everything that cuts off the flow of your tears, then you'll have a feeling of much greater intimacy with God. You'll understand that now someone else governs your life. You'll sense that now someone else has grasped the tiller, someone else has taken hold of the wheel (indeed of your own hands) and is now directly guiding you Himself. You become someone guided by the grace of God.

We are guided by God's grace, to which you can surrender yourself in all confidence. Indeed, it is impossible for you to do the slightest thing without it. Consider the glory of the stars, the magnificence of the heavens, and the wonders of the earth: none of these can give you anything at all. The only thing that can *fashion a new heart within you* (cf. Ezek 11.19), rendering the old one utterly useless, is the power of God's grace.

When you surrender yourself to God, moreover, your soul will experience three things: contemplation, prayer, and theology.

To begin with, you will contemplate all things in the church spiritually — and you will even be able to do so with your physical eyes, although that kind of seeing is acquired only after many struggles. In the meantime, you contemplate things spiritually. Your eyes have adjusted. The darkness dissipates and the shadows disappear. You contemplate the *One Who Is* (Ex 3.14) coming towards you. You contemplate the depths of your soul being kneaded by grace, like dough being kneaded into bread.

Your soul is now a malleable lump kneaded by the hands of God. You see your soul being worked on, passing through His fingers, and you're happy, so happy, at being in His hands, and watching them at work. Do you see His face? Not yet. His *back parts*? (cf. Ex 33.23) No, for that would require the power and holiness of

Moses. All you see is His hand, as we see it in certain icons, emerging from a cloud in order to bless the saint standing below it.[6] And now you are standing next to God, watching His hand as it kneads your soul.

Not only do you contemplate, but you also begin to pray. Whatever you've done up until now, whatever you've said, even if you were praying, was nothing more than childish prattle, the nursery songs and infantile outbursts of your soul (cf. 1 Cor 13.11). They were expressions of your ego, and as such did not enable you to ascend to God. But now you are praying, and this prayer is given to you, placed within your heart, by the Holy Spirit, Who *intercedes with sighs too deep for words* (Rom 8.26). Now grace itself, God Himself, places prayer within your soul, in the mouth of your soul. *Now* you are praying.

It is terrible to think that even if a man prays in the morning and at night, as much as *seven times a day* (Ps 118.164), his prayer may remain earth-bound, nothing more than a little jump just a few inches off the ground. How horrifying it is indeed when the words of our prayers are not the words of God, through which alone we are able to pray.

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[6] On the "hand of God," compare St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Isaiah* 4.4: "Sacred scripture most frequently uses the word 'hand' to designate God's active powers, through which He brought all things into being" (PG 70:1065CD); Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Commentary on 4 Kings*: "The 'hand' of the Lord is the gift of His grace" (PG 80:752CD); and St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*: "The spouse's hand signifies God's active power . . . all of the soul's capacity for understanding is struck by the wondrous works wrought by the divine hand, the knowledge of which transcends human understanding, for the divine nature working such wonders cannot be grasped or contained" (McCambley, 208-209). Elder Aimilianos, in his comments on Ps 89.12: *Make Your right hand known to me* (*Let us Rejoice in the Lord*, 141-142), notes that "the *right hand* of God is God's energy, His grace; it signifies the presence of God. It is not a symbol of grace that has not yet begun to act, but of active grace, of grace operative and working. As such it signifies God as actively present."

But now we truly pray, because previously we had truly contemplated: our spiritual vision was true. Now we can pray because contemplation unites us with everything. For example, now I see you, and thus I can embrace you. So too do we see the hand of God and take hold of it, so too do we lay hold of His grace. Now we're able to pray to Him, because we know Him. Can you speak to an unknown God? What will you say to Him? But now that you see Him kneading your soul in His hands, you can say: "Dear God, relax Your grip a little," or "Dear God, pummel me, because my heart is still like a stone," or "Stop a bit, Lord, I'm tired," and again, "Take me up, Lord, I can stand it: this is what I want, what I desire." There is so much that you can say, and your words are a prayer, and your prayer becomes theology.

You see, you pray, and you theologize: these are the three things we do when we leave the world and enter the church.

"You theologize." What does that mean? You begin to think about God, so that, within yourself, you begin to speak about Him. You begin to understand God based on real, experiential knowledge of Him. You become a person who knows God. You theologize. And that means that your words, tempered by knowledge, begin to express the truth of your experience. When I see you, and recognize you, I say: "Ah, it's you!" That's how it is. Previously your soul was trying to say something, but you couldn't understand what it was. But now it cries out: *Abba, Father!* (cf. Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6), and with those words you become a theologian: you discover that your mind is in God, that your word is God. You've captured God in the most delicate fibers of your heart and spirit.

Now you can understand and come to know God. And you can talk to Him. What more could you possibly desire? Now you understand that to know God means to *taste* God. The knowledge of God is my nourishment. I have eaten God. This is why, when the Holy Scriptures and the Church Fathers talk about the word of God, they say: "Eat and drink it" (cf. Mt 4.4; Lk 4.4).[7]

This, then, is the table that God has spread for us in the open air. *How will we be able to feed so many thousands of people?* His Apostles asked Him (cf. Mt 15.35; Mk 8.4). How? From what source? And the answer was: *Thousands of people ate, and were satisfied* (cf. Mt 15.37-38; Mk 8.8-9). And it is not just those who happen to be here today, but there are hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands, who are fed by God in this wilderness, on this patch of green grass, in this open air, in the heaven which is the Church.

Our food, then, is the knowledge of God. And when this food is ingested and assimilated by us, it is transformed and brings about something new: our rebirth and regeneration. The first birth was death, for *sin gives birth to death* (cf. Rom 5.12). But God brings about a new, different kind of death, namely, the death and resurrection of baptism. That is what is happening here: death is brought to birth, by which I mean the birth of the death of sin.

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[7] That the words and teachings of Scripture are spiritual food and drink was a central theme among the early Alexandrian theologians, such as Clement, *Stromateis* 5.10 (PG 9:101A); and Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel John* 1.30 (PG 14:80B). The food of Scripture, moreover, is prepared for consumption by the art of interpretation. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa: "If the spiritual interpretation of Scripture is rejected, it would be like offering wheat for human consumption without having ground the corn; or without having separated the seeds from the chaff; or without stripping away the husks from the grain; or without otherwise preparing the bread properly. Therefore, just as food not worked over is fit for beasts and not for man, so one could say that the inspired words of Scripture, when not worked over by a more subtle contemplation, are food for irrational beasts rather than for rational men. And this applies not only to the Old Testament, but to the teachings of the Gospel as well" (McCambley, 39). See also St. Maximos the Confessor, *Second Century on Theology* 65-66 (*Philokalia*, 2:153).

And what is sin, my beloved? It was the blindness from which we suffered; it was that which separated us from God and prevented us from seeing even His *back parts* (cf. Ex 33.23). What, then, is the death of sin? Precisely this: the feeling that now we've begun to have rights in the life of God. We haven't had any rights so far. But now we do, because sin has died within us. But not because we've repented. Set your mind to repent, sit down and weep for your sins, and you'll see that, in the midst of all your tears, your mind will be thinking about something else. In the same breath with which you ask God to forgive you, you'll be wishing for other things as well. The death of sin that occurs in true repentance is brought about only by the action of God. He alone brings forth the death of our sinfulness and the cessation of our passions. Go ahead and try to fight against your anger, against your rage, against your hate. Dig deep inside yourself and try to uproot even the smallest of your passions. You'll accomplish nothing on your own. Nothing! It is God alone who puts our sins to death and gives us new life.

How does this happen? As you're coming to church with the intention of struggling with your passions, you'll see that at some point you'll say: "Where's my anger? My rage? Where's my resentment? My jealousy? My anxiety? Where's that sorrow I was carrying? Where are my worries? My disappointments? Where's my bitterness?" All those things are passions and they have been put to death in the new life of the believer. The death of sin has been accomplished within us, and now repentance makes its appearance in our lives. Our relations with God have been smoothed out, and now we are able to approach Him with boldness. We discover that our sin is withdrawing from us, as are our passions, along with all the earthliness of our heart.

An earthly heart is a heart that has grown heavy and dense. Just as our body puts on weight and gets fat, so too can the heart become corpulent and fleshly (cf. Mt. 13.15). It becomes earth, flesh, dense with carnality.[8] Now, however, you see your heart's fleshliness melting away, just as body fat melts away through fasting, so that the body becomes purified and spiritual. As a result, the heart loses its material aspect and is purified, prepared, and readied to receive God.

This process of transformation is the spiritualization of our being, a movement which coincides with the entry of the divine into our lives, the advent of divine energy acting within us. That energy had always been present, but was not active. Now, however, the desire for God is born within us: it begins to kindle and soon bursts into flame. The eyes of our senses begin to open; the eyes of our souls, the eyes of our body. Upon what do these eyes open? What do they see?

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[8] Compare Evagrios, *On Prayer* 51: "Why do the demons want to produce in us gluttony, fornication, greed, anger, and resentment, and the rest of the passions? So that the intellect might thicken by them and become dense, and not be able to pray as it ought" (*Philokalia*, 1:61). Evagrios regularly applies the metaphor of "thickening" to the intellect that relaxes its vigilance, falling away from knowledge into forgetfulness; cf. Sinkewicz, 198 (= no. 50), who cites related passages from: the *Kephalaia Gnostica* 4.36: "The intelligible fat is the thickness that arises in the intellect as the result of evil (p. 279, n. 35); *To Monks in Monasteries* 48: "Much sleep thickens the intellect; godly vigil refines it" (p. 125); and the *Praktikos* 41: "When we have to stay for a while in cities or villages, then especially we should hold vigorously to the practice of abstinence while in the company of seculars, lest, with our mind grown thick . . . it do something ill-considered and become a fugitive under the blows of the demons" (p. 105).

First of all, they see the sweetness of God. God is no longer the great, absent one, but is greatly present, and we begin to see His sweetness. And this is what primal man — including his modern-day counterpart — needs in order to be attracted. Aren't we attracted by things that are sweet? We *see* sweetness. Why do we say "see"? Because the feeling is so strong, so intense, that it overwhelms us like a flood of water. When you see something sweet, it can intoxicate you. That is what I am experiencing here. And so the whole of you becomes a vision of sweetness: a vision of Christ as the true desire of our hearts. Thus we see, and experience, the sweetness of God. When we don't taste that sweetness, we can only inch along like snails in dark, damp, suffocating places.

In the second place, we see another, different sweetness: the pleasure and the delight of our own souls that have now become participants. Take, for example, a fragrant, holy relic. Touch it with your hand, and then leave. You'll see that your hand has the same sweet smell. Or place a relic somewhere on your vestments, on your clothes, or conceal it somewhere on your person without telling anyone about it. You will see that people will immediately ask you if you're wearing perfume! Thus we have two things here that are related but distinct: the fragrance of the saint and the fragrance of your clothing, the latter being derived from the former. That is what we have here: our heart, and our soul, bathed in sweetness, drawing its pleasure and delight from the Lord.[9]

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9. On sacred relics, see Arch. Aimilianos, "Saint Nicholas: Our Herald to God." See also George Mantzarides, "Miraculous Icons and Sacred Relics," in *The Sacred Monastery of Vatopaidi: Tradition, History, Art* (Mt. Athos, 1996), 1:118-128; and Bishop Athanasios Yevtich, "The Mystery of Touch: Holy Relics in Serbia," in his *Christ: The Alpha and Omega* (Alhambra, CA: Western American Diocese of the Serbian Orthodox Church, 2007), 245-252.

But most people go to church, present themselves to Christ, and leave without ever drawing out any of His strength, without experiencing his power, the way the woman with the flow of blood did (cf. Mt 9.20). And then they say: "So what did I get from Christ? I came back from church the same person I was when I went." But we feel a certain sweet pleasure, a feeling of delight. Now nothing is lacking. On the one hand there's God, Who sweetens your life and gladdens your youthful soul, which is always rejuvenated when you stand in His presence. On the other hand, your heart is gladdened, and your soul says: *I shall dwell here, for I have chosen it* (Ps 131.14).

If someone truly longs for these holy feelings and experiences, how can he not receive them? How can God not respond? This is why God has established this liturgical assembly. This is why He arranges for angels, archangels, and saints to be present here with sinners, so that each can give something to the other. The saints are here so that they can give their saintliness to the sinners. And sinners are here to convey to the saints their desire for their holiness, so that they, too, may be found in their company. We find all of this within the church, provided that all is still and silent within us, and that our inner gaze remains fixed solely on the drama unfolding before us.

When we come to church, what are we looking for? Fish in the desert? No. We are looking for that hidden, "inward meditation" of the heart which unites us to Christ.[10] If we want to be healed, if we want medicine to enter our body, we have to accept an injection in our arm or somewhere else. In order to receive sap, a branch has to be grafted on to another tree. You have to graft a wild olive branch onto a cultivated tree if you want the bitter to become sweet (cf. Rom 11.17-21). The same thing happens here in the church, where you are mystically and sacramentally united with Christ. In and through your inner meditation on these things, they will become a reality.

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[10] See St. Isaiah the Solitary, *On Guarding the Intellect* 26: "We have practiced virtue and done what is right, turning our desire towards God and His will, and directing our incensive power, or wrath, against the devil and sin. What then do we still lack? Inward meditation" (*Philokalia*, 1:27-28).

When we come to church filled with longing, when we celebrate liturgies and vigils, what are we looking for? Christ! In order to find Him, strive to enter into that hidden, inner meditation and you'll see that He'll come of His own accord. You'll see the heavy stone roll away from your heart and He Himself will rise!

What are we looking for? A universal state of being within the Church; an inward state of being, "conferred by Jesus."[11] Experiences, feelings, longings, and visions: it would be unfitting to say that these are anything other than a state of being created by Jesus Christ; a state of being which is realized and fulfilled only by His presence, and which, without Him, disappears at once.

My beloved children, behold that which is here; nothing else. Whatever you see has been established and conferred by Jesus.

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[11] See above, n. 1.

3. COMMUNION WITH GOD*

And they brought to Him a man who was deaf and dumb; and they besought Him to lay His hand upon him. And taking him aside from the multitude privately, He put his fingers into his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, "He has done all things well; He even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak" (Mk 7.32-37)

The man who was brought before the Lord in today's Gospel lesson, my beloved children, is a compelling figure indeed! He was both deaf and dumb, and although he longed to communicate, he could neither hear the words of others, nor give voice to his own thoughts. Above all, he could not communicate with the Lord, to Whom he had been brought.

Faced with the great misfortune of a soul unable to speak to its Redeemer, the Savior *sighed* deeply (Mk 7.34), just as He did at the tomb of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days (cf. Jn 11.38). On both occasions our Savior sighed, because a man who is dead and buried is no different from a man who is incapable of speaking to the Lord or hearing the voice of God.

This is why the Lord addressed only one word to him: *Ephphatha — Open!* (Mk 7.34). Open, ears and hear! Open, mouth and speak! *At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak* (Mk 7.35). His mouth was opened, the bonds were broken, and his ears began to hear the words addressed to him by God, Who was standing before him in the flesh.

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* A sermon preached to his spiritual children in the Church of St. Andrew, in the Patisia district of Athens, on 12 April, 1975.

You may think that this event, which took place long ago, has little to do with us. But it seems to me — and I have always been moved by the thought — that all of us are deaf and mute with respect to God. How many of us can say that we've spoken to God, and that God has heard us? How many of us can say that we've heard the words of God; that we've received within ourselves the deep impressions of the divine voice? How many of us have our mouths opened to God; our ears poised in readiness to hear Him? On the contrary, we are deaf mutes, forever silent and unhearing though standing in the presence of God.

Let us consider, my beloved, the meaning of the word "Ephphatha" — "Open!" Let us consider how God addresses this word to us; let us see how our bonds can be broken, and how we can enter into communion with God.

When we stand before God, we know that, in order to hear and be heard, we must enter into a personal dialogue with Him, and this can only take place by means of the intellect. *God is spirit* (cf. Jn 4.24), and He communicates Himself to man spiritually, addressing Himself to man's highest spiritual faculty: the intellect. When we open our mouths and cry out to God, God hears us, because He receives the waves of the mind which pulsate outward like sounds from the mouth. The intellect of course can generate such waves without the mouth. What is important is that it should speak to God.

And what does it mean to "speak"? Why do people engage in conversation? Because they want to communicate with each other, because one person wants to know the thoughts and feelings of another, which is ultimately a desire to share in the life of the other.

When I "speak" to God, therefore, it means that I communicate with God and am united to Him.

It follows, then, that for my intellect to speak to God, it must first of all *turn* towards Him. Such a turn is necessary because the intellect is in constant motion, it is forever being side-tracked, thrown off its course, endlessly shifting its focus upwards and downwards, this way and that.[1] This is why we say things like: "I lost my train of thought," or "my mind was wandering," which indicate that the intellect, in a manner of speaking, has removed itself to another place. At times we wonder where people's minds are, or whether or not they've lost them entirely. Clearly the intellect moves about, wanders off, and at times gets lost.

As a result, communication with God requires a movement towards God. It presupposes a passage of the intellect to the creator of the intellect, an exhalation of the mind to the source of inspiration (cf. Gen 2.7); a movement to Him from Whom the intellect came forth, and to Whom it naturally returns. To speak to God, then, means to turn towards God. It means that our intellect *stretches forth* to Him (cf. Phil 3.13). Our communication with God, our conversation with Him, our prayer to Him, is precisely this extension of our intellect, which is an extension of our entire being. It's an effusion of my entire soul, the bending down of my intellect upon God. I do not call this an inclination of the heart, because more often than not the heart deceives us. When our heart inclines towards someone, bending, as it were, in that person's direction, it is because that person somehow satisfies the needs of our ego. The intellect, however, yearns for its counterpart in the spiritual world; it seeks that to which it has a natural affinity, its prototype and model, whose form and character it shares.

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[1] See St. Basil, *Letter* 2.2: "We must try to keep the intellect in tranquillity. For just as the eye which constantly shifts its gaze, now turning to the right or to the left, now incessantly peering up and down, cannot see distinctly what lies before it, but the sight must be fixed firmly on the object in view if one would make his vision of it clear, so too man's intellect when distracted by his countless worldly cares cannot focus itself distinctly on the truth" (LCL 1:9).

My beloved, communicating with God requires that the intellect be kept in a certain tension, as if I were about to release it from a sling, and send it flying to God directly, without any deviation from its path.[2] It requires, in other words, an exclusively dedicated movement of the intellect, in which the intellect is free from all thoughts, feelings, concepts, images, and indeed from anything whatsoever that might absorb it, attract its attention, and make it go astray.

Turning to God means that I stretch forth to Him with perseverance. Why? Because I'm down here on earth, and He's in heaven above. Can I reach Him? No. I cannot ascend. He must descend in order to find me. When I want to receive Him and speak to Him, He has to come down from the heavens, empty Himself, and surrender His being to me (cf. Phil 2.7-8). Only thus can the exchange occur, namely, for me to enter Him, and for Him to enter me. And while I am awaiting His advent, the only distraction that I permit myself is the distraction of God.

Why, my beloved, do I call the arrival of God a "distraction"? Why do the Fathers use this term?[3] Because we've become so egotistical, and our existence has become so false, we think that life consists in nothing more than our selfish, self-regarding behavior. As a result, our mind must abandon the place in which it's become

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[2] See above, chap. 1, n. 21.

[3] Following 1 Cor 7.35, spiritual "distraction" (*perispasmos*) is generally understood in negative terms, and as such is treated by St. Basil in his *Long Rules* (Question 5, "On Avoiding Distraction"): "We must recognize that we can neither observe the commandment of the *love of God* itself, nor that referring to our *neighbour*

(Mt 22.36-39), nor any other commandment, if our minds are continually wandering about . . . thus the discipline for pleasing God in accordance with the Gospel of Christ is practiced by detaching oneself from the cares of the world, and by complete withdrawal from its distractions" (FOTC 9:241-242). See also the opening sentence of St. Gregory of Nyssa's work, *On Virginity*: "The aim of this discourse is to create in the reader a desire for a life of virtue. But because of the many distractions which according to the Apostle Paul are associated with the married life (1 Cor 7.35), this treatise recommends the life of virginity" (FOTC 58:6). The same definition can be found in the writings of Abba Isaiah, on which see Arch. Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*, 200, 355-356, 467-468.

Other writers, however, define the term differently, and give it a positive sense. See, for example, the remarks of Evagrios on Ecc 5.17-19: "Here Scripture calls the knowledge of God the *distraction* of God, because such knowledge *distracts* and thus separates the pure soul from the things of the world" (SC 397:138-140). See also his comments on Ecc 3.10: "*I have seen the distraction, which God has given to the sons of men to be distracted by*: *I have seen*, Ecclesiastes says, the sensible objects that *distract* the mind (*dianoia*) of man, which God *has given* to men prior to their purification, so that they may be *distracted* by them. He also says that their *beauty is transient and not eternal* (Ecc 3.11). For after purification we no longer consider sensible objects merely as mental distractions, but rather as objects set before us for spiritual contemplation. For the mind is molded in one way by sensible things when it grasps them through the senses, but it is differently disposed when it contemplates the intelligible principles contained within the sensible. This is why he called the *distraction* given by God *transient*. For God, foreknowing that the soul would fall prey to the passions, gave it senses and sensible things, so that being distracted by them, it might escape the evil thoughts which are imposed upon it by its adversaries" (ibid., 80-85). See also St. Peter of Damascus: "It is true, as Solomon says, that *God has given noxious distraction to the sons of men, so that they may be distracted by vain things* (Ecc 1.13). This is to prevent their mindless and impassioned inertia from dragging them down into what is even worse" (*Philokalia*, 3:106; cf. 231).

accustomed to dwell; it must break free from itself, and all its illusions, and turn to that which truly exists, that is, to God (cf. Ex 3.14). And this constitutes a "distraction" in the sense of a radical change of direction, a breaking away from our habitual self-centeredness. Viewed positively, "distraction" as communication with God means a resolute and stable orientation to God. It is a spiritual disposition that does not vacillate or change.

When your intellect is focused in this manner, you'll see that something strange happens. There, where you least expect it, in the foggy mists of your soul, in the gloom of your sins, your eyes will begin to shed tears. Like water from a spring, these tears will flow naturally, simply, and abundantly. And you'll say: "What's this? How is this happening?" It's very simple. This is the support that God gives us to lean on as we begin the journey toward union with Him. It's a sign of help from God, the first indication that He's heard us.

Without my wanting it, then, without my seeking it, without my striving to achieve it; without any pressure, without me being put to any trouble, or being placed under any stress, God Himself sends me this sign. Think of these tears as the first bell that God rings to let us know He's on His way. When such tears come, I know that help has arrived, and that God is somewhere in the vicinity.

Having received this help, we realize that, without any effort on our part, we have attained a measure of spiritual concentration.[4]

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[4] "Concentration" translates the Greek word *synnoia*, which appears in Evagrios, *On Prayer* 43, and has been translated both as "concentration" (*Philokalia*, 1:60), and "perception" (Sinkewicz, 197, no. 42). The word is also attested in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (4.16), where it has been rendered as "constant recollection," with an explanatory note: "Literally: consciousness; here it means consciousness of God"

And this happened because our intellect brought into unity all that was divided within it, thereby creating a singular, unified orientation towards God. The intellect now ascends upward and is afraid of nothing. The more it contemplates the heights to which it must ascend, the more it is astonished, amazed, and encouraged, and thus nothing can halt its climb.[5]

Standing alone upon the heights, however, and facing the majesty of the invisible God, the intellect is seized with fear. It knows that it has arrived at the feet of God (cf. Ex 24.9-11).[6] If such an ascent takes place in church, the intellect will have arrived at the *hem of His garments* (cf. Is 6.1), at the shining boundary, in other words, composed of all the saints, the place of their mystical and absolutely real presence.[7] Here, together with the saints, the intellect enters

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(Moore, 26); and, alternatively, "a totally recollected state" (Luibheid and Russel, 95). For yet another rendering, see St. Peter of Damascus, *On the Virtues and the Passions*, where *synnoia* is translated as "meditation" (*Philokalia*, 3:162, line 13).

[5] Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 224-226: "Once the soul is released from its earthly attachment, it becomes light and swift for its movement upward, soaring up from below to the heights. If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight higher" (Malherbe, 113).

[6] The "place" wherein God is said to stand (i.e., where His "feet" would be) recalls the *place of God* seen by Moses and the elders on Mount Sinai, a kind of heavenly pavement fashioned of sapphire which was later associated with the purified intellect; cf. Evagrios, *On Discrimination* 18: "When the intellect has shed its fallen state and acquired the state of grace (cf. Col 3.9-10), then during prayer it will see its own nature like a sapphire or the color of heaven. In Scripture this is called the *place of God* that was seen by the elders on Mount Sinai (Ex 24.9-11)" (*Philokalia*, 1:49); cf. Sinkewicz, 180 (= no. 39), with additional references.

[7] Whereas the Greek (Septuagint) version of Is 6.1 reads: *I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne . . . and the house* (i.e., the temple) *was full of His glory*, the Elder

into a mode of unceasing communion with God. That which was promised to us by God now becomes our very own: *I shall be with you until the end of the ages* (Mt 28.20).

But now I am seized with fear because I have grasped the mystery: my feet have trodden on the *hem of His garment.* Standing in awe lest something befall me, I am suddenly overtaken by a second event, more instinctively, I'd say, because I am not fully conscious of it: compunction of heart. And this is the foretaste of yet another experience, namely, the knowledge that this terrifying God is *my Lord and my God* (Jn 20.28). He is my Father, Whose presence I haven't yet felt, but Who never ceases to be my Father (cf.

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here cites the Hebrew text, which reads: *I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne . . . and His train filled the temple,* with *train* referring both to that part of the Lord's garment that trails Him, along with His heavenly retinue, in this case a moving file of angelic beings, into whose company the elder has introduced the saints (cf. Dan 7.10; Rev 4.4). In ordinary Biblical usage, "train" refers to the tassels which the Jews wore on the corners of their outer garment, as a reminder of God's commandments (cf. Nu 15.38; Dt 22.12), the "lengthened" form of which was criticized by Christ (Mt 23.5). That the "train" of God constitutes the outer limit or boundary of the divinity would seem to be implicit in the belief in the healing power of Jesus' own garments (cf. Mt 9.20; Lk 8.44).

In his comments on Ps 83.2 (*How beloved are Your dwellings, O Lord of Hosts*), Elder Aimilianos refers in passing to Is 6.1, and offers the following: "The phrase, *How beloved,* is not so much a reference to the feelings of the Psalmist, but rather to the nature of the *dwellings,* which for him are *beloved,* attractive in and of themselves, and draw him like a magnet. What he has in view, then, is not the *dwellings* but rather the *Lord of Hosts,* just as he does when he speaks of the *train of His garment,* or of *His glory* (Is 6.1), or of His beauty: in each instance, he is referring to God Himself, and desires to draw near to Him. If, then, the *dwellings* of God are so attractive, how much more attractive is God Himself? But because it is impossible for him to describe God's attractiveness, he transfers his thought to the place in which God dwells" (*Let us Rejoice in the Lord,* 153).

Gal 4.6). And I am filled with compunction at the way He stoops down towards me, by His tender care for me — and I am moved to confess my sins to Him.

I pour forth my confession: I tell Him my sins. I may do this, however, without really feeling that I'm a sinner, because to a certain extent I love my sins: I want them, I think about them, and I haven't made the decision to separate myself from them. Nevertheless I realize that they are obstacles, and, at that moment, I cry out to them: "Be gone!" But these are words that my heart refuses to pronounce — although my intellect knows they are true, because it has had a foretaste of God, and understands that, because of its sins, it cannot communicate with Him. And so compunction comes, which is another gift from God.

You see, my children, what man can't do, God does. What are we? Utterly weak and feeble. We begin something, and, not only do we fail to finish it, but we don't even remember what it was in the first place. We make a decision and commit ourselves to a course of action, and then we start something new, as if the previous decision had never been taken. We set out for God, and we're scarcely out the door before we forget why we left. Man is such a strange creature! He knows how to stagger around, but not how to walk in a straight line. His legs are broken and he is seriously ill. And then God comes along to strengthen him:

"What do you want?"

"I want this."

"Take it. What else do you want?"

"This."

"Take it. What else do you want?"

"That."

"Take that as well."

But even these magnanimous gestures are lost on me. They fall upon deaf ears. My soul is so infirm that it cannot speak. But my intellect understands, it has an intuition, it knows in advance, and it begins to go deeper. A mystical dialogue begins, independently of my own volition, without my being fully conscious of it, without my fully sensing what is taking place. It is a dialogue that unfolds within the unconscious, which has forgotten nothing, which remembers when it used to walk with God in paradise, when it used to seek Him out and speak to Him. For this dialogue to begin, we need only shed the tears we mentioned a moment ago, and God will respond, and we are amazed upon seeing the gifts He gives us.

We have, then, a sense of fear, followed by compunction. And this, moreover, is followed by something strange: I feel, deep within myself, that God rejoices in me.

Perhaps all of us, at one time or another, have brought joy to somebody. You may not know how or why, but you can feel it. Now, at this stage, you begin to sense that God rejoices over you, which causes a shoot of joy and gratitude to spring up within you. Such joy is a foretaste, an awareness that God is near, that He is coming. It is also a feeling of gratitude, because before you receive God's gifts, you see Him emptying His pockets to give them to you.

Together with the joy that the soul feels, there comes a second feeling, which is always bound up with it: a feeling of pain. This is the pain of a soul which is so rich and yet so poor. It is the pain of a soul which, in the face of God's mercy, understands its own hardness, its tragic failure, the dreadful state that it's in. It understands how small and petty it is, and it begins to feel pain. This pain is caused primarily by the soul's consciousness of its distance from God. Such a soul asks: "Why are You so far away from me, my God? Even though you give me joy, why don't I understand You?

I know You rejoice in me, but why can't I take You in my arms? I am here, and You are somewhere else, infinitely far away."

The soul is in pain because of its fall and exile.[8] When we reach this point, when our soul begins to feel this pain, we come to the second, extremely critical stage in our communion with God. It's what the Church Fathers call the "highest intellection."[9] What does that mean? It's as if you were standing on some great height, from which you could fall into an abyss, but from where you can also see all there is to see. You're conscious of having been seized and raised up to a place where you can look into the abyss of your transgressions and understand the depth of your fall. Just as you can look down from the window of an airplane and see the world you've left below, so now you look down on the self you've left behind, while your intellect ascends to the heights.[10]

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[8] The soul's experience of exile from God is explored above, in chap. 1.

[9] See, for example, Evagrios, *On Prayer* 35, where "undistracted prayer" is called "the highest intellection of the intellect" (*Philokalia,* 1:160; cf. Sinckewicz, 196 [= 34a], where the same phrase is translated as "the mind's highest act of intellection").

[10] A similar image is used by St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Beatitudes* 6: "When from the sublime words of the Lord, resembling the summit of a mountain, I looked down into the ineffable depths of His thoughts, my mind had the experience of a man who gazes from a high ridge into the immense sea below him. . . . If a man looked down from such a high peak into the sea below, he would feel giddy. So also my soul does now, as it is raised from the ground by this great word of the Lord: *Blessed are the clean in heart, for they shall see God* (Mt 5.8)" (ACW 18:143).

See also Nyssa's *Homily* 7 on Ecclesiastes: "The effort of the mind to grasp eternity resembles a person standing on the edge of a cliff, inasmuch as a great summit abruptly falling off to a limitless depth suggests the divine transcendence, which reaches on high while extending to the depths below. Apart from a narrow and precarious foothold, such a person has nothing else to hold on to: no further step can be taken. To me, this image pertains to the soul's passage through the created order in its search for that which existed before eternity, and which is not

And while you're there, you want nothing to enter into your mind, and thus you think no thoughts, you form no concepts, you shun all mental representations. You divest the intellect of its contents: every feeling, every idea, every expression, along with the very activity by which ideas and expressions are formed. Why? Because all of our language and all of our thoughts are taken from, and belong to, the finite, created order. Whether you offer thanks to God, or supplicate Him, or confess to Him, or ask Him for anything at all, you can only do so in the human language of this world, of which you, too, are an inseparable part.

As a result, you experience an ultimate, supreme form of intellection, that is, a spiritual understanding of the ultimate reality: the One God. This is a mode of perception absolutely exclusive to the intellect, in which the intellect has renounced all things, leaving them behind for the sake of its movement towards God. It follows, then, that your entire being must abandon everything and remain alone at the summit.

When the intellect reaches this point in its mystical progression towards God — which is the most important place in human existence, situated at the spiritual center of our being — you will discover something remarkable: your passions, your faults, and, above all, the things most deeply-rooted within you that torment you,

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subject to the world of space and time. Such a soul has nothing to hold on to, no spatial extension, no temporal duration, no measure, or anything at all like these things, which it might grasp as a foundation for apprehension. Instead, slipping about on all sides because it has nothing anywhere to lay hold of, the soul is overcome with vertigo, and, being utterly powerless, returns to the state natural to it. But it loves nothing more than to know, and to be persuaded, that the Transcendent is something other than the nature of things that can be known" (GNO 5:413-414) (paraphrased).

have all vanished. When you're there, beholding God, where is your anger? Where is your egotism? Where's this, where's that? They have all disappeared. What a wonderful thing! Uproot your passions! Isn't that what we say? But that's incorrect, because it is God who does that. Someone who is tied down can't get up by himself. If you're tied down, you're stuck there. And the passions are terrible bonds from which you need to be liberated, and that is a task that God alone can undertake and accomplish.

God is with us at every stage in our progression. He helps us to renounce the world; He helps us sever our bonds; he assists in the purification, initially of our intellect, and then of our heart and conscience.[11] When this purification is complete, we arrive at a condition of *agnosia*, a state of unknowing: we no longer dwell on things from the past, neither are we absorbed by things in the present. All that we've learned now seems like so much rubbish, not worth hanging on to, and thus not worth knowing. Now I want to avoid every temptation, and thus I must be on my guard with respect to any memories that come to mind. A single memory, a single thought, a single mental image can topple me from the heights and hurl me back down into the dark places my soul once haunted.

Above all, I must avoid every form of abandonment. What do I mean by "abandonment"? People often have the feeling that they've been abandoned. "God's abandoned me," you hear them say; or "everyone has abandoned me; nobody cares about me," and things like that. When you feel that way, you're good for nothing. Anyone who thinks like that needs to take a good look at himself. Such a person needs to discover who he really is, and rid himself of this feeling, because what he is experiencing is essentially a division within himself. This kind of abandonment is not a rift between the self and God, or between the self and other people, but a division within one's own soul, within one's own intellect. And the divided elements have to be unified before they can ascend to the Lord. The intellect must reject every thought of, and refuse to ascribe any truth to, feelings of abandonment and isolation. When it rises above such feelings, it *stands* like the prophet Habakkuk *upon his watchtower* (Hab 2.1).

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[11] Compare the thought of St. Augustine, who believed that intellectual conversion precedes moral and religious conversion, evident in the structure of his *Confessions*: cf. VII (intellectual conversion); VIII.5-11 (moral); and IX-X (religious).

So there you are on the heights, surveying the earth below and the sky above. Your intellect now begins to feel its freedom and wants to fly. It realizes that God is waiting for it on high, and so, with all its strength, and with the help of Him who gave prayer to mankind and fortified its faltering will, the intellect begins to ascend to God. Has your mind ever descended into the hellish depths of sin? Has it ever run away and flown off to those whom you love? In exactly the same way, the intellect is now drawn upwards to God. And with this we have arrived at the third stage: the ascent of the intellect to God, which is one of the most beautiful moments in our spiritual life.

Your intellect begins to ascend in *spirit and truth* (cf. Jn 4.23). What does that mean? It means that this ascent occurs solely by the power and attraction of the Holy Spirit. Like a magnet, the Spirit first attracts us before He Himself comes close to us. And because He is the exclusive bearer of the truth, being pulled in His direction means that I must abandon all my illusions. I must abandon, in other words, all that is mortal and fleeting; all that has had a beginning and will one day come to an end. *In spirit and in truth* I must abandon my very self, which also had a beginning and at a particular moment will die. I abandon my views and my opinions; I abandon what I believe, what I feel, what I experience, what I know. I abandon whatever is bound up with my will, even that which for me seems to be the truth. I abandon even my power to will, my feelings, everything that is a lie and an illusion, along with all that changes and passes away like insubstantial swirling wind. Having abandoned all this, our spirit ascends, and it does so by the attraction of the Spirit, although it is not without its own powers of attraction.

What does our spirit have that attracts the Holy Spirit? Ardent, excessive love, which overwhelms it as it stands upon the summit of spiritual progress. At the same time, then, that the intellect trembles before the surrounding void, it is possessed by a love supreme. The intellect has been swept up to a lofty peak — not a physical place, of course, for that, too, would be vain and false, and thus not *in spirit and in truth* — but rather a dimension of life and experience, a disposition of the mind. It is something you can understand and feel, but it's not something that you can bring about on your own. It's a rapture of the intellect, which means that the intellect is attracted and ascends by the power of the Spirit. Like a rider urging his horse forward, the Holy Spirit, in the words of the Fathers, "urges the intellect toward love."[12]

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[12] Evagrios, *On Prayer* 63 (*Philokalia*, 1:63, which translates the Greek *eros* as "longing"); cf. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 7: "God dwells in different ways in those who are worthy of Him, analogous to their respective capacities and worthiness. In one He dwells as if in a place, in another as if in a house, and in others as on a throne and others as a footstool. Let anyone becoming a chariot or a well-trained horse receive God the Rider, and complete his course being directed by God to what lies ahead" (McCambley, 143). God's relation to the soul as that of a rider to his horse is a patristic reworking of the Platonic chariot, so that God takes over the reigns from the fumbling hands of the human intellect.

Do you see now how the Holy Spirit arranges everything? And now that He is driving the ascent of the intellect, He urges it onwards to love. Our own spirit, on the other hand, seeks to exert its own attraction, to ascend on its own, to spread its wings in order to reach the Spirit of God. At the same time, the Spirit rests upon it like a rider on his mount, and the more our own spirit feels the Holy Spirit upon it, the more fearless it becomes in the face of the void over which it ascends. As the intellect continues to ascend, it sees that the Holy Spirit does not halt its climb, but ascends even further, and thus its ardent love is kindled and its flight upwards becomes entirely vertical.

Until now, we were earthly people leading miserable lives, caught in the thick of invisible warfare. Now, however, we have acquired our first spiritual experience — "spiritual" because it is of the Holy Spirit — as a result of which God stoops down to me and enters my life. Until now, all of this, including my union with God, was unfolding within my intellect. But I'm not only intellect — I'm body and soul, a complex, living being that God created and knows so well. That is why He loves me, even though I am still overshadowed by my own darkness. Now God comes, and I realize that "having come, He walks with me, He walks in me" (cf. 2 Cor 6.16).[13] It seems like He's next to me, walking alongside me, but I realize that He's actually within me.

When we realize, my beloved children, that the Holy Spirit is walking within us, we come to the penultimate experience of communion with God, which we call a "state of union" or "intimacy." We also call it a "state of prayer," because prayer and communion with God are the same thing. Prayer is not merely an address of words to God, but an ascent to Him.

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[13] The quotation is from Evagrios, *On Prayer* 66 (see *Philokalia*, 1:63, which does not capture the sense of the Greek *symporeyein*, which denotes a walking and journeying together; cf. Sinckewicz, 198 [65]: "so that God may draw near and journey with you").

What, then, is this state or condition that I have reached, initially through my intellect but encompassing the rest of me as well? It is, in fact, not a state, but rather a capacity for dispassion. It may seem like a state of being, or a kind of condition, inasmuch as it is something that I have achieved, a reality within me; but in essence it's a capacity, that is, a turning, a habit which forms in my life. It is, strictly speaking, a dispassionate capacity, which is the condition for the possibility of union with God. What does it mean to be dispassionate? It means turning *exclusively* to God, with all your strength, energy, power, and love. There is no turning aside to anything else whatsoever, because that would immediately introduce a false, human consolation taking the place of God.

Dispassion, then, is an unshakeable disposition, at this stage not simply of the intellect, but penetrating my entire existence. The love of God that I experienced during my ascent now becomes part of my daily existence, and I become the intimate companion of God. I may go for a walk, stroll through the garden, return to my home, go to bed, work in my office, in my cell — anywhere at all — but wherever I go, and whatever I do, I am the intimate companion of God. This is the experience of my restoration after the fall.

A moment ago we spoke about the memory of original joy retained in our subconscious. Now, in my conscious mind, in my will, in my perception, and in my whole being, I am aware that my relationship with God has been restored and that once again I am His companion. I begin to feel the joy of a small child who has found his father, after believing that he'd lost him forever. Having found his father, the child claps his hands, laughs, and shouts for joy. So too do we experience primordial joy when we discover that, like Adam in paradise, we are walking with God. The soul now lives as if every day it were celebrating a feast. Such a soul becomes festal, celebratory, joyous. It acquires a different kind of piety, based on its experiences, and which is consequently more powerful, more authentic.

At this stage we experience a second form of tears, which flow directly from the inward state of the person, and not as a result of divine action. Along with this there is a marked desire to flee from the world, to disappear. We recognize our sin, become aware of our guilt, and want to repent before God. But more work needs to be done before actual repentance can occur.

You begin to want to pray in a pure way. What does "in a pure way" mean? If you clean your house, it means you put it in order, you make it ready. It means you've gotten rid of everything superfluous, and that the place is open and awaiting the arrival of your invited guest. So too must the space within our soul be clean, open, ready, and devoid of all that is superfluous, as befits the dwelling place of God. You begin to feel pure and passionless; your intellect and heart are free of all impulses and movements contrary to God. You begin to pray and to live with a loving forbearance, which means you begin to live like God, *according to the image of God* (cf. Gen 1.27). You begin to live with God as He does towards mankind, and you begin to want to do as God does. As we said, you are filled with the desire to pray and to live purely, to conduct yourself in purity, dispassionately, with forbearance, in the sense given to these words by the Fathers of the Church.

At this point, our ears are opened and we begin to hear, just like the man in the Gospel. Through the intellect I begin to hear the first rustlings of angelic wings. I hear angels gathering together, just as they did for Daniel (Dan 10.5), for the Three Children (Dan 3.25-26), for Tobias (Tob 5.4), and for so many others. I feel the presence of these spiritual beings and acquire a bold intimacy before God, realizing that He has become my own Father, and has recognized me as His child. I had recognized Him earlier as my Father, but now He recognizes me. This is my intimate companionship, my true conversation, with my Father.

Now, my beloved children, we are at the final stage of human experience and existence: the communion of the saints that we feel at the time of prayer. There is no prayer in isolation. There is only prayer *in spirit and in truth* (Jn 4.23). And those who pray *in spirit and in truth*, who communicate spiritually with God, acquire great sensitivity and great delicacy of feeling — people of crude habits certainly never pray — but those who do become so sensitive that they never wish to sadden anyone. They feel that if they do, then all their efforts are in vain, that their point of departure in the spiritual life was false, as was their ascent to God.

Those who make genuine progress in the spiritual life strive to be united with all mankind. They feel a deep concern for the salvation of all their fellow creatures, along with a desire to love and embrace everything and everyone, with no exceptions. When they present themselves to God, they want the whole world to be there with them. They would not dare to arrive at the divine throne empty-handed and alone.

At the same time, however, there is also a sense in which they want to withdraw from all things and be alone with God, so that "separated from all, they might be united to all."[14] They encompass and embrace all others within themselves, and discover that love isn't something that comes from our hearts, but rather — to put it in human terms — from the heart of God. And this love penetrates our hearts and minds, from where it flows out to others, ultimately returning to God.

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[14] Evagarios, *On Prayer* 124 (*Philokalia*, 1:69).

When a person reaches this stage and feels that he is in complete harmony and union with all mankind, God grants him conscious perception of communion with Him. This means that he consciously perceives and feels that he is united to God. Formerly we spoke to God, but now we *hear* Him. Earlier my *tongue was loosened*, but now my *ears are open* and I listen. I understand that I've spoken to God, and now God's answering, so I listen.

This is why the Fathers teach us to urge our intellects in the direction of a differentiated and yet unified form of knowing, a spiritual perception that simultaneously encompasses prayer and communion. This means that we are not only supposed to hear God, but to experience Him with all our senses, in the full resonance of our being, with the entire fullness of our life. The "softly speaking water of God"[15] should bubble up from within us; the rivers mentioned in Scripture should flow forth from the deepest well-springs of our being (cf. Jn 7.38). Then I understand what the phrase, "You are a theologian" means,[16] for then I *become* a theologian, revealing and knowing God. God (*Theos*) addresses His Word (*logos*) to me; He speaks to me, and I come to know His Word, I acquire immaterial knowledge of God. Then I can ascend. He has opened my eyes, and, without my spirit entering a state of ecstasy, I behold the ecstasies of heaven, and then I know that my life is true.

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[15] Compare Jn 7.37-39, and St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 7.2: "There is in me no fiery longing for material things, but only water living and speaking in me (Jn 4.10; cf. 7.38), and saying to me from within: 'Come to the Father'" (LCL, 234-235).

[16] Evagrios, *On Prayer* 61 (*Philokalia*, 1:62), cf. below, pp. 287-289.

Then, my beloved children, we receive what is known as an "assurance," a sense of spiritual certitude brought about by the plenitude of God's presence.[17] God completely fills us, we are replete with His Word. And with this plenitude comes a greater desire for God's presence. We are filled, therefore, with the desire for greater fulfillment.[18] And this sense of assurance, this plenitude of divine presence, concludes with an imperceptible sigh, because the Holy Spirit *intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words* (Rom 8.26). God's life begins to enter us: it is God Who speaks, God Who hears, even though it seems that I am the one who is speaking and listening. The same thing happens when two people are in love: when you look, when you listen, when you love, when you eat — whatever you do — because I love you, I feel as though I'm doing the looking, as though I'm doing the listening, and that your love is mine as well. When you go somewhere, I feel as if I'd been there too, because I love you. That's the way it is with the love of God that now has entered me. His life becomes mine. And when the Holy Spirit sighs, He does so in order for us to be more permanently, more perfectly together, and thus I feel deep, inexpressible sighs coming from His heart.

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[17] On "plenitude of assurance" (*plerophoria*), see below, chap. 5, n. 4.

[18] Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 230: "Moses shone with glory. And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to partake as if he had never partaken" (Malherbe, 114); and St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Chapters* 1.7: "When the Three-Personed deity dwells within the saints, and is known and felt to be present, it is not the fulfilment of desire, but the cause and beginning of a much greater and fervent desire. Because from this time on, the man who enjoys the presence finds that it gives him no rest. It drives him on towards the flames of an ever deepening desire for the Godhead as if he were being consumed and devoured by fire. The mind can find no limit in the one it yearns for. It cannot grasp Him, and it cannot set any limit on its own desire and love. Yet as it strives to grasp and hold on to this endless goal, it feeds within itself a longing that knows no bounds and a love that can never be satisfied" (McGuckin, 34-35).

One of the Fathers says: "If you have not yet received the gift of prayer, persevere patiently and you will receive it."[19] That's what prayer means. That's what communion with God means. It's as if he were saying: "Haven't you received the gift of prayer yet? That's such a pity, because it's so easy. Just stay there and ask the Holy Spirit for it. He will hear you, and you will receive the gift." Why? Because communion with God is a constant receiving from God, and not a giving of anything to Him.

When we reach this stage and understand that communion with God is so easy; when we understand that God both absolutely transcends all things and at the same time is contained wholly within us — like that small scroll in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev 10.10) — then the following happens: you lose your will. Let me explain.

There are times when you're sitting and talking to God, when, all of a sudden, you're overcome by the desire to run away from everything, so you go and hide, you isolate yourself, in order to be alone with God. You open your hands — in saying this I'm trying to express something that's going on inside you at that moment — you lift up your arms, but you discover that you're not in control of yourself, neither of your body, nor your mind, nor your heart. Your entire self has been overwhelmed. Everything has become strange to you. You've lost your self-determination, your free will.

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[19] Evagrios, *On Prayer* 87 (*Philokalia*, 1:65).

You, who were free, are free no longer. You've surrendered your freedom to God. You've become His slave, His *foot-stool* (cf. Ps 98.5). You're subject to the will of God, you've united your will to His. God is the Lord, and you no longer have lordship over yourself. You don't know what you're doing; it seems as if you're losing your mind, as if it were flying off somewhere. Perhaps it is.You don't know, you don't understand, you can't think, you have no idea what's going on. You will later. The questions I'm asking now, I'll ask again later, when I've come to my senses, and I'll wonder: "What am I doing, what's going on? What's happening to me? Do I want this or not? Perhaps I'm losing my mind! My God! Have I gone mad?" And then I'll see my mind rising again, even higher, to the summit of a great spiritual mountain, from where I'll call on all creation, on everything that has breath, to hymn the Lord. With our arms raised aloft, we'll look around and shout: "Come you plants! Come, you birds! Run, you rivers! Come, you seas! All together, the whole of creation, the whole of nature, praise the Lord!" (cf. Ps 148).[20]

And everyone was amazed when the dumb man spoke. *Truly, truly*, they said, Christ *has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak* (Mk 7.37). And the same will be said about you, my children, if you live in the way we have described, for that is what people want to see; that is the real miracle. And then they'll say: "Christ has done all things well." How easy it is! Nothing is difficult for Christ. He spoke, and immediately it came to pass: *The deaf hear, and the mute speak.*

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20. For a related passage, see Arch. Aimilianos, "The Prayer of the Holy Mountain: Yesterday and Today," 304-306.

4. MONASTIC LIFE: DIVINE ELECTION*

It is not our usual practice to gather for monastic conferences on great feast days, but we're doing so today in order to consider a passage from Saint Gregory Palamas, which was read this morning in the refectory.[1] The passage in question concerns a well-known verse in the Gospel of Luke, where the Lord promises to send the Holy Spirit and says: *But you remain here, until you have been clothed in power from on high* (Lk 24.49). Remain here, in other words, until God sends you power to fortify your weakness.

The Lord had much to say about the weakness of human nature, and He knew that the only thing capable of giving it strength was the Holy Spirit, the *power from on high* that God promised to send. The reading was stopped precisely at that point, because I wanted to say a few words, but then I thought better of it, seeing that you were tired after the vigil, and so I left it for this afternoon.

It seems to me that, if anything justifies our presence here in the monastery, if anything vindicates our voluntary separation from the world, it is precisely our consciousness of our weakness. We are here in recognition of our need of the promised *power from on high.* From this power we expect something new to emerge: a new birth, a new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5.17; Gal 6.15).

If, by the breath of God, the soul of Adam became a *living being* (Gen 2.7), then our own souls, despite their earthly entanglements, have the potential to become spiritual. But this can only happen if we place ourselves within the power of the grace of the Holy Spirit. I say *within* His power, because the Lord describes our relationship to the Spirit as a *being clothed* in the Spirit. We are covered by the Spirit as with a garment, and like a garment we put Him on and enter into Him (cf. 1 Cor 15.53-54; Rom 13.14; Gal 3.27).[2] We are, in a sense, absorbed by Him, not in our nature, but freely, voluntarily. Corruption and death are also absorbed — digested, as it were, by life (cf. 1 Cor 15.54) — so that a new mode of existence can arise; not simply a human being that has achieved full personhood, but a *theanthropic* being, a divine-human entity, in communion with the Holy Spirit and transformed by the power of His presence.

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* Delivered at the Sacred Monastery of Simonos Petras, on Ascension Thursday, 30 May, 1975.

[1] St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 21.11, *On the Ascension of the Lord* (*Homilies*, 1:270-271).

It is this new state of being in the Spirit that I would like to talk to you about today.

I

As I said a moment ago, there is only one thing that justifies our presence here in the monastery. It is not the fact that we pray, because that can be done anywhere. Neither is it our commitment to spiritual struggle, because that, too, can be undertaken anywhere, and, in any case, there are times when we are not engaged in such struggles. Neither is it our asceticism, since that is a basic feature of all Christian life; nor is it our desire for God, which is experienced *in every place of His dominion* (Ps 102.22).

What, then, is it, that justifies our presence here? A revelation.

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[2] Compare St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Texts* 48: "When we live in our natural state, wearing the resplendent robe of the Spirit, we dwell in God and God dwells in us. Then we are called gods by adoption and sons of God, sealed by the light of the knowledge of God" (*Philokalia*, 4:34).

A vision, in other words, of the monastery as another *upper room* (cf. Acts 1.13), as the *city of the living God* (Heb 12.22), the house of God the Father, from the depths of Whose *paternal bosom* the Son came into the world (cf. Jn 1.18), and bestowed upon us the Holy Spirit, *Who proceeds from the Father* (Jn 15.26). And this is how we must see the monastery: as the locus of God's activity and revelation. Only then will we be able to justify our presence here, both to the Church and to our own conscience.

For us the monastery is the house of God. What does that mean? It means that God is the master here and does what He likes. It also means that, because *God is in the heavens* (Ps 113.11), the monastery is an image of heaven. Entering a monastery, then, means to entrust yourself to God and His household, knowing that you have become a *citizen of His heavenly kingdom* (cf. Phil 3.20). As an image of heaven, the monastery is also a type of the heavenly temple: beneath its altar are the *slain souls* (Rev 6.9), and in it God is worshipped spiritually.

The monastery is also the ark of the Lord's covenant, the most sacred treasure of the ancient Israelites, which they carried about wherever they went (Num 14.44; Jos 3.2). The ark was a witness that testified to the glory, power, and presence of God. What the children of Israel awaited, experienced, and saw by means of the ark — all of which is described in Scripture — is precisely what we seek and find and experience in the monastery. If, then, we do not *seek these things and find them* (cf. Mt 7.7); if we were not seeking them even before we came here; if they remain mere concepts with no foundation in our experience, then the monastery is nothing more than a place of refuge, a shelter, an institution.

And in the light of the Holy Spirit, the monastery is revealed to be greater than the ark, because the Lord said that our eyes would *see greater things than these* (Jn 1.51). If, then, we do not set our sights on that which is greater, then all we're doing is idly constructing religious typologies, or waxing nostalgic about ancient Biblical history. We must therefore hold firmly within our vision the *greater* truths and realities that God came to reveal to us.

We have, then, in the monastery, the witness of God's presence. What does that mean? It means that the monastery is the *throne* upon which God is seated.[3] Isaiah beheld the Lord *seated upon a throne, high and lifted up; and His train filled the temple* (Is 6.1). That is, around him are the *seraphim* (Is 6.2), and *all the saints* (Eph 3.18), along with those earthly angels, the monks, who, by their daily tears and prostrations, *ascend and descend the ladder that reaches to heaven* (Gen 28.12), sanctifying the place in which they dwell and being sanctified in the process.

To be "seated" means to be in authority. It symbolizes power so great that it may be exercised while seated. Thus the throne points to Him Who is absolutely the Lord, absolutely able at any time to do whatever He wants, to give whatever He wants. In the place where He is seated, where He presides, He is everything.

God is seated, then, enthroned in the midst of the monastery. But He is also among as one both asleep and awake. We are thus in the position of His disciples, who saw Him sleeping so deeply that they were worried and said to Him: *You're asleep, but we're in danger of perishing. Wake up and save us!* (cf. Mt 8.23-25). Thus He is present as one asleep, but also as one who awakes and arises together with us. And it is He who remains wakeful and keeps vigil in the monastery, just as his disciples saw Him keeping watch through the night, and were astonished upon learning that He went without sleep for hours and entire nights at a time (cf. Lk 6.12; Mt 14.23; 26.40-43).

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[3] On which, see below, chap. 11.

Seated, sleeping, and rising, He is also present as one *walking about among us* (cf. 2 Cor 6.16). If, however, He is not any of these things for us, if we fail to perceive the reality of His presence, you can be sure that, not only are we here in vain, but we're doing ourselves a great injustice. What a shame that we can't see what's happening all around us! What a shame that we're unable to enjoy the fruits of this reality, of this God, Who moves about so comfortably among us, ready to do whatever we ask, just as He heard the voices of His prophets and disciples and answered them.

The monastery is a witness to God's presence, to His glory. And the glory of God is His *inaccessible* and immaterial *light* (cf. 1 Tim 6.16), which shines forth as an uncreated energy from His essence. Although the glory of God is inaccessible and immaterial, we are nonetheless able to perceive it and participate in it. This is of special significance, because that which is inaccessible has to be united to us; that which is immaterial has to become perceptible to us.

The glory of God is a divine illumination, as in the cloud, or in the pillar of fire (Ex 13.31-22; Neh 9.12), or in any other bright and radiant form, which — to speak in less than strict dogmatic terms — is an externalization of God's divinity, a projection of His being, which, of course, cannot actually be "outside" of Itself. It's a vision of God, a vision of His holiness, and thus a vision of His exclusivity, because the word "holy" denotes that which is absolutely exclusive and separate from all else. The manifestation of divine glory is a sign of the presence of Him Who alone is entirely, exclusively, alive. Standing before us, then, exclusively for us, is *He Who exists* (Ex 3.14). And so great is His glory that no one can comprehend it. The *hem of the garment of His glory alone covers the whole of His heavenly temple* (cf. Is 6.1).[4]

The monastery, then, is a witness to the glory of God. And any monastery that is *not* a witness to that presence cannot be a real monastery. For the monks who live there, such a monastery can do nothing but remind them of their life in condemnation, for they have lost sight of God's presence. Moreover, a monastery where God is not known will fail to remind its monks of their pain, their emptiness, their incapacity, and their weakness, precisely because they lack a witness to the glory of God.

God's strength and power are also evident in the life of the monastery. We glimpse this, for instance, in the singing of the Thrice-Holy Hymn, when the words "Holy Mighty" and "Power" are chanted by thunderous voices, so that the words and the music and the energy of the souls that are singing, released in stentorian cries, fill the whole church with their meaning. All of this is a sign that in reality something of the sort is happening in the monastery.

And when we speak of God's "power," we speak of the Son of God, for He has always been thought of as the *Power* and *Arm* of God (cf. 1 Cor 1.24; Jn 12.38). The monastery, therefore, is a witness *par excellence* to the Son of God, Who for our sakes *emptied himself* (Phil 2.7), and assumed our human nature in order to give us His divinity. Our relation to the Son, moreover, is of the greatest significance, because it is He *who reveals the Father* (Jn 14.9-11; 17.6), and *makes Him known to us* (cf. Jn 1.18). *Whoever asks anything of the Son, receives his request from the Father* (Jn 15.16; 16.23), and what the Father gives is a revelation of His person in the Spirit. This is why, in the end, when we say *in spirit and power* (Lk 1.17),

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4. On this reading of Is 6.1, see above, chap. 3, n. 7.

we virtually link the two words, so that, in a sense, we mean "in the Power of the Spirit."

It is therefore the Son in the Spirit Who is at work in the monastery and gives it all its strength. Otherwise, our life would not be life, but a kind of death. Do you remember how the disciples spoke to the Jews in the Acts of the Apostles? They *spoke boldly in the Lord, Who confirmed the word of His grace* (Acts 14.3). In what did their boldness consist? What was it that they said with so much conviction and assurance? It wasn't so much the fact of their teaching, but that what they said was itself the *word of grace.* In a sense, their words were a projection of the Word Himself, an extension of the action of the Word in the Holy Spirit. This is why their message — their word — that the *Word was God* (Jn 1.1), had so much power, because it was God Himself, God the Word, speaking in and through them. For this reason the Apostles were conscious of being witnesses of the Word; they sensed that they themselves were the mouths of the Word, and, as it says, *of His grace.*

And this grace, this power, which was the Word Himself, the energy of the Holy Spirit Himself, *granted that signs and wonders should be done by their hands* (Acts 14.3). Those *signs and wonders* were forms of divine revelation that could be understood by the people, because they took place within the realm of the senses. We are readily drawn to palpable phenomena, and thus the Lord, through the hands of the Apostles, acted by means of tangible signs and wonders, so that the revealed word would be embodied, concrete, and substantial.

Our life in the monastery is not simply a question of being present. That would be a *sign,* of sorts, but not a *wonder.* Neither is it a matter of efficient social organization or effective community planning, for that would merely be the organization of life unto death.

Outside of the Holy Spirit, the human spirit has no life; and outside of the Word, all our words are *noisy gongs and clanging cymbals* (1 Cor 13.1).[5] Our deadness must be leavened with divine life (cf. 1 Cor 5.6), and thus all that a monk does is nothing other than an attempt to stir, to awaken, Him *who is asleep* (Mt 8.24). We want Him to rise from His sleep, so that He might serve us, and so that we might serve Him. We want Him to awaken, so that He might give us what we've asked for, *open for us what we want opened* (cf. Mt 7.8), and provide us with what we need. It's an effort to awaken the sleeping God.

But does God sleep? God is asleep to the extent that we are not capable of receiving Him as One Who is awake.[6] God is life itself, but He is nonetheless dead for those who cannot receive the Living God within themselves. Our life in the monastery, then, consists precisely in the effort, in this activity — not without *violence* (cf. Mt 11.12) — to rouse God from His sleep, in order to walk with Him, indeed to run and catch up with Him as He walks in the morning, as He keeps vigil at night, or in whatever else He is doing. *Let us attain to God in thanksgiving* (Ps 94.2): when we do, we will be living in the house of God, over which He reigns supreme.

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[5] Compare St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Theological and Gnostic Chapters* 2.6: "A man who is deaf to the Word is deaf to all voices. But the man who hears the Word can hear them all and still be deaf to everyone. He hears them all, but listens to none, except those who speak within the Word. Even from these he takes nothing, for he listens only to the Word, Who speaks silently through them" (McGuckin, 64).

[6] Compare St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 31.22: "According to Scripture, God sleeps and is awake, is angry, walks, has the cherubim for His throne. . . .For we have given names according to our own comprehension from our own attributes to those of God. His remaining silent apart from us, and as it were not caring for us, for reasons known to Himself, is what we call His sleeping; for our own sleep is such a state of inactivity. And again, His sudden turning to do us good is the waking up; for waking is the dissolution of sleep, as visitation is of turning away" (LNPNF 7:324-325).

II

The monastery is the place where we acquire knowledge of God. Each one of us is called to acquire this knowledge, since *He Who is* (Ex 3.14) cannot remain hidden. It would be tragic for me to be deprived of my ears and my eyes, or for me to be devoid of feeling and perception; but it is infinitely more tragic for my soul not to perceive God. As a vehicle of spiritual perception, the monastery is the most vital, the most authentic, and the most luminous place where one can see and know God.

Since God is actively present in our midst, and can be spurred to action by us, the monastery as a whole constitutes an interior vision of God, a vision of God's Spirit in the form of *fiery tongues* (Acts 2.3). God manifested His Spirit not simply as something audible, but as something compellingly visible, as *tongues of fire.* And because this is an inward vision of God, it is also deeply personal. I might be able to see something like this, but you might not, and vice versa. You and I might be living in the same monastery, but you are alive and I, though physically present, might be spiritually dead.

From this it follows quite clearly that life in the monastery is an experience of God that is at once direct, mystical, and utterly real and true. It is, in the first place, an experience. What do we mean by experience? Take a simple example. You're a monk but you attend some sort of social function, and thus you're out of your element. You don't know what to say. Somebody else, though, who has experience, is at home there. He's learned how to handle these things, based on his experience of them. Experience, then, means ease and familiarity within the monastery. And that means being at ease in your dealings with God. It means that you know, in a certain sense, God's characteristics and distinctive features: you know what He asks of us, where He is, where He goes, where you can find Him, how you should meet Him, or where He goes when He's angry, or when He loves you, and when He's ready to surrender to you. Altogether you feel at ease – astonishingly so – with God.

As a result, life in the monastery is knowledge of God and participation in the life of God, not through talking or reading books, but through illumination. A transmission and reception of God and His light: that's what life in a monastery is. This is why, as I've often said, I cannot conceive of a monk pursuing any other goal. I can't understand a monk whose life is focused on something other than God. A man who becomes a monk is someone who enters the house of God in order to acquire intimacy with God; to acquire boldness of speech before Him; to approach and encounter God with bold assurance. Without this boldness, all you can do is cower outside the dark cloud, lest you *die upon seeing His face* (cf. Ex 33.20).

Life in the monastery is precisely this boldness of speech. It is ceaseless communion with God; an unending movement and assimilation to Him. Growth in likeness to God is the labor of our soul and our life (cf. Gen 2.26). Here in the monastery, it's as if we're living on the very throne, dwelling in the very house of God. The monastery is the place where we encounter God. The monastery is the desert where John the Baptist encountered Christ (cf. Jn 1.29, 35-36). It is a desert because it stands at a distance from the world, far from all that is inhabited, populated, filled up and crowded. And it is only to such empty places that we can run, because Christ and the Church have always had the propensity for *flight to the wilderness* (cf. Rev 12.6). And this desert, this wilderness, is the monastery.

The monastery is the *captivity* in which Ezekiel beheld the glory of God (cf. Ezek 1.1). It is the place of our captivity, the place of our voluntary imprisonment, our self-imposed slavery, because God can do nothing if we have not offered ourselves to Him as willing sacrifices. This is the place of our exile from the thoughts of men, and from their consciousness. It is our Patmos, or any other such sacred place, where revelations have been given to evangelists and prophets (cf. Rev 1.9). It is the cave and the mountain where the saints encountered God. Indeed, it is God Himself, to the extent that God penetrates and fills all things. Is it possible, then, to stand before God like the angels, like the archangel Gabriel, and not encounter Him? To not see Him? To not acquire bold familiarity in our relationship with Him?

III

Being a monk means being an exile, being imprisoned, separated from everyone, and, therefore, being alone with God.[7] This voluntary isolation is necessary as a conscious presupposition or precondition for us to achieve what we desire. Its fulfillment comes later.

What do we feel when we stand before God? We feel what all the saints and the prophets felt; what every soul enlivened by God has felt, namely: fear. When I come to apprehend the majesty of God, when I acquire knowledge of His sublimity, when I begin to feel that the Lord is my Lord and my Master, and that my entire life depends upon Him, the feeling of fear is a perfectly natural response. Without the fear of God, all things become gateways to sin. Without the fear of God, no one can attain wisdom, because *the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God* (Prov 1.7). Without the fear of God, there can be no revelation. No discovery or recovery of God is possible without it.

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[7] On the theme of spiritual exile, see above, chap. 1.

Afterwards, when you have acquired the fear of God, you have the right, in a sense, to present yourself before Him without any hesitations or obstacles. For the moment, the feeling of fear banishes your sin, along with your wickedness, and it removes the various barriers raised up by your self-regard. God recognizes and acknowledges your fear, and He overlooks these things, allowing you into His presence. And as you stand before His throne, before His love, in His sight, you have a second inward experience: compunction.

What is compunction? It's a constant pricking of the conscience, of the heart, of your thoughts, of your entire being. It's like the pricking of a pin that won't allow you to be still. It's like something that keeps you awake, that won't let you sleep, that gives you no peace until you get up and deal with it. It's the feeling of a powerful confrontation, the sense that someone is facing you, someone totally different, totally other, to whom you can only yield and bow down. That's compunction.[8]

After this there appears a feeling within the heart, but more so within the intellect, to the extent that the lower, rationalistic faculty is at rest — because when the latter is operative it makes us lose all feeling of God.[9] There is, then, a powerful feeling and sensation within the heart, although this eventually subsides, since it's a human thing. What remains is that which is more closely related to God: the sensation within the intellect.

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[8] See St. John Klimakos, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 7: "Compunction is a perennial trial of conscience, which brings about the cooling of the fire of the heart through mental confession. . . . Genuine compunction is undistracted pain of soul, in which it gives itself no relief but hourly imagines only its dissolution; and it awaits, like cool water, the comfort of God who comforts humble monks" (Moore, 70, 74; compare Luibheid and Russel, 136, 139). See also St. John Chrysostom, *On Compunction, to Demetrius the Monk* (PG 47:393-410); id., *On Compunction, to Stelechios* (PG 47:411-422); and St. Diadochos of Photike, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 92 (*Philokalia*, 1:290).

The intellect is awestruck. It is in a state of ecstasy before God. And this sense of awe, this ecstasy, gives way to a perfect silence of soul, which is a state of passivity, a recognition of its own limits: *wretched man that I am, for I am pricked to the heart* (cf. Is 6.5; Rom 7.24). Unable to do anything, not knowing how I came to be here before God, not knowing where to flee for safety, all I can do, like someone caught in a difficult situation, is to remain silent.

This silence, this immobility, confirms our consciousness of our sinfulness, our awareness that we are incapable, unworthy, of standing before the Great God. I realize now that I am a speechless infant, a dark molecule in the face of this glorious God, and thus wholly unworthy to stand before Him. I remain silent until I receive assurance that I've been deemed worthy of the vision of God.

Until that happens, my silence and my compunction will gradually lead me to make a humble confession before God. But this humble confession is not humility as such, since we're still a long way from being able to humble ourselves before God. Humility is the *fruit of the Spirit* (cf. Gal 5.22-23), which blossoms in those in whom the Spirit dwells, whereas at this point we are simply standing before God. Neither is this "confession" in the sense of repentance, because repentance is a perfect gift from God, which is given to those who have already progressed in the knowledge of God.[10]

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[9] On this question, see above, chap. 1, n. 20.

[10] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On Repentance* 7.1: "Let us take the medicine of salvation, which is repentance, or rather let us receive it from God, for it is not

In order to repent, you have to understand yourself, which you can only do if you understand the holiness of God. But standing now before God, all I can do is make a humble confession to Him, like a little child who's done something wrong, and who stammers something to his father, seeking to gain his love and confidence as a sign that the misdeed has been forgotten.

This humble confession ensures both God's pardon and the commencement of my purification. It ensures my pardon, since I am a child of God. But I still haven't essentially repented. I've done nothing. I've yet to make a beginning (cf. Ps 76.11).[11] Nevertheless, God's love is so great that He grants me a preliminary pardon; He extends to me a preliminary purification, so that I can be free to live a spiritual life. Once we've received pardon and purification — for all spiritual progress begins with purification — our lives are thereafter marked by this event, for now our contact with God has become much more substantial: God has now decisively turned towards us.

Here I ask you to pay particular attention. I call this event, this

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something we are able to administer to ourselves. Repentance is a heavenly gift" (PG 49:331AB); St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 46: "Repentance is given to man as grace after grace, for repentance is a second regeneration by God" (*Homilies*, 223).

[11] See the account of Abba Sisoes, in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: "It was said of Abba Sisoes that when he was at the point of death, his face shone like the sun. He saw the angels coming to fetch him, and he begged them to let him do a little penance. Those who were with him said, 'You have no need to do penance, Father.' But the old man said to them, 'Truly, I do not think that I have even made a beginning yet.' But they all knew that he was perfect" (Ward, 214-215, no. 14); and the last words of Abba Pambo: "I am going to God as one who has not yet begun to serve him" (Ward, 197, no. 8). See also the words of St. Ignatius of Antioch (*Letter to the Ephesians* 3), uttered on the eve of his martyrdom: "Even though I am a prisoner for the Name, I am not yet perfected in Jesus Christ. For *now* I am beginning to be a disciple" (LCL, 177).

substantial deepening of our relationship with God, *election* by God. What does election mean? It means that the destiny, which God has prepared for me from all eternity, has now become a reality, a personal event. I now actively participate in this dispensation, in accordance with God's foreknowledge and loving-kindness, which He shows to me, a sinner, in a particular time, and in a specific place.[12] Turning towards me, God now expresses to me in time His eternal involvement with me. But since God exists outside of time, He has, in a sense, *already* turned towards me — He has *always* been turning towards me from all time — but now I see it for myself. This is why I say that He has chosen me for election, and *set me apart* (Song 5.10) from among the thousands all around me, just as I have chosen Him, from among a thousand other things, so that He has become for me the Chosen One.

God now bends down to me, and makes a proposal. What sort of proposal? The consecration of my heart to Him; a dedication of my inner self, and not simply of my feelings and emotions. God has accepted my humble confession. He has pardoned me and purified me. He has chosen and elected me. Now He comes to chat with me and make His proposals.

If I had come to the monastery with plans and projects; if I had already been set in my ways, God would not have been able to make any kind of proposal to me at all. He only makes such proposals to those who are free, who are not imprisoned by their sense of self and personal achievements. A monk therefore is someone who has surrendered himself to God, in essence to the Church, so that now God can ask of him whatever He wants.

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[12] See St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 39: "In proportion to a man's volition to strive toward God, and in proportion to his purpose to attain his goal for God's sake, God works with him, helps him, and manifests His providence in him" (*Homilies*, 190).

Now, because God has chosen me, because He has turned to me, He opens up new horizons for me. He continues His dialogue with me, because everything that is happening to me requires understanding on my part; it requires that I become an active participant, that I work at it, so that I can become consciously aware of what is taking place within me. I begin to meditate and to understand; I begin to rejoice at the fact that God has condescended to visit me and to seek me. As a result, I come to understand how God is disposed towards me, which is initially His gesture of turning towards me and then His thoughts about me.

This is the first significant event in the spiritual progression of a monk: the moment of his personal, mystical selection by God, which — if he accepts it — endows him with inalienable rights. Why? Because we have already given ourselves to God through our tonsure, just as we were previously given and united to Him through our baptism.

At this point, the experience of our contact and relationship with God is entirely voluntary and mystical. This is the first stage that we reach on our mystical progression towards God.

If our progression continues properly, the experience of divine election will be followed by another experience: the experience of acceptance. What is acceptance? A new, interior state of the soul; a mystical exclamation in which the soul says "yes" to God. It is the readiness of our being. It is the interior disposition of receptivity, because, as we know, *to everyone who has, more will be given* (Lk 19.26). God gives and is given to *everyone who has.* If you have the right disposition, if you already have something of what it is you're seeking, you'll receive more. If you haven't, then you'll lose *even what you think you have* (Lk 8.18).

When God finds this inner acceptance within us, then He can be captured and surrender Himself to us, just as Christ in His fullness surrenders Himself to the hands of the priest as the Body and Blood of the Eucharist. As we've said, it's impossible for Him to surrender Himself to anyone without that person's consent; He will not give Himself to someone who does not want Him, who does not long for Him with love. And this is because any violent intrusion on the part of God against a human soul would only provoke internal resistance and opposition. It would create hatred within us towards God. And God respects nothing so much as our freedom, even when our response to Him is negative; when we deny Him, run away, and sin. God's respect for human freedom is not readily paralleled among men, who more often seek to control and enslave each other, imposing their will by force.[13]

This acceptance of ours, then, is something that we enact, or rather which exists as a condition within us. It is something that, in essence, has its origin in God, and which we have cultivated. For me to be able to receive God means that God has already moved me, as I shall move Him, so that He might be pleased to come and abide in me more permanently. God agrees to move loving hearts, that is, the hearts of those that love Him. This is the moment when I shall discover, and reveal to God, whether I love Him or not. Words stop here: a person's true self becomes apparent.

Enclosed within the experience of man's acceptance of God are profound mysteries; revelations of the depths within us. These mysteries confront us with the entire hell into which man has fallen. They make us mindful of God's love, but also of the chasm that has opened up within us, an inferno which prevents us from receiving God. And whereas we sought Him eagerly when we first came to the monastery, now, the minute we see Him approaching, ready to take His place on the throne of our souls, we say: "No, God! Go away!"

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[13] Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Lord's Prayer* 3: "There is one true and perfect power which is above all things and governs the whole universe. But it rules not by violence and tyrannical dictatorship, which enforces the obedience of its subjects through fear and compulsion. For virtue must be free from the fear of the taskmaster, so as to choose the good by a voluntary act" (ACW 18:51).

We see Him overwhelming us. We see Him ravishing us. We see Him taking possession of us. We see Him dominating us. And then we become anxious about ourselves, our ego asserts itself, and we deny Him — our lips might be chanting His praises, but our inner being resounds with that dreadful "No."

We see in all this a glimpse of God's impenetrable mysteries and eternal plan: He chose those whom He wanted to be His disciples. He called those whom He had foreordained, and He made those whom He foreknew worthy of becoming His own (cf. Rom 8.29-30). We also see people who often do things they don't want to do, and neglect to do that which they truly desire (cf. Rom 7.15-16), and thus we see the mystery of human life and discover the contradictions and paradoxes that exist within it.

How, finally, can I bring myself to accept God? That is, how can I be made worthy to be accepted by Him? In the words of the Psalm, all that's needed is for me to become *beautiful*, so that God will *desire my beauty* (Ps 44.12). Or, if you prefer, all I have to do is remain on bended knee before Him, so that at any moment He can raise me up, and make me co-lord with Him.

When the mystery of acceptance unfolds within me, and when I see its progress, I see that the love we were talking about isn't sufficient, because my *will* must also enter into the process. God comes not only into the hearts of those who love Him, but to those who are willing, who voluntarily desire Him.

Thus far, we've seen the mystery of human life, in which the fateful "yes" or "no" is acted out before God. Now we have my personal situation, which will demand the denial of my being, so that I might be able to become God's. This is now the stage of self-denial. I must empty myself in order to put on God, just as God *emptied Himself* to put on man (cf. Phil 2.7). He descended, and now I must do exactly the opposite: I must ascend, in order to put on God, not in His essence but in His energies.

I have to empty myself, to emerge from myself, to abandon myself: in a sense I have to fail. I have to confront my failure, directly and unflinchingly, because my eyes are clotted with egotistical self regard. I must therefore empty my vision in order to be filled with the vision of God. In the eyes of my fellow men, I have to become a failure, a non-entity, *low and despised* (cf. 1 Cor 1.28), cast aside like the body's waste (cf. Phil 3.8). Moreover, I have to become a failure for myself, because who knows what sort of ambitions I've nurtured, deep within my heart? Who knows how many castles of sand I've constructed, how many self-deceiving dreams I've dreamt? I have to abandon all of that, without force, because nobody's ever been able to do violence to himself. I have to lose my self, because only he who *loses his life* will be able to *find it* united to God (cf. Mt 16.25).

Now we experience the greatest crisis of our life, the most critical moment, as the result of which we will either stand or fall. If there ever was a moment about which God spoke when He said: *Now is the judgment of the world* (Jn 12.31),[14] this must surely be it.

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[14] Note that the Greek language uses the same word (*krisis*) to express both "crisis" and "judgment."

This is the moment of crisis — of our own crisis — which we considered when we spoke about the Prayer of the Heart.[15] It's the moment when our interior disposition emerges into the light and becomes an actual movement of the will; when it becomes something stable, and therefore something that God can rely on.

I've been emptied: now I can be filled. So God, Who has chosen me, comes. And because He has chosen me, the moment arrives when I become His, and am ready to listen to His urgings, to understand and accept what we called His proposals. Now I'm ready. Now I have experience. I've been worked on like a lump of dough, and now I'm ready for a more direct encounter with God.

Man now discovers God, even though he always knew Him. I discover the familiar God. Now I know Him, and He can call me by name and talk to me. This is the moment of my mission, when I become an apostle. What was symbolized at my tonsure — my acquisition of the dignity of apostleship — now becomes a reality in my personal, interior, mystical life. From that moment on, I accept that God commissions me and sends me forth *to follow the Lamb wherever He goes* (cf. Rev 14.4).

Where can I go? Where I never imagined. I can go out into the noise, out into the world. I can go to a monastery, or to a hermitage. I might live in a cave, but I might also be called to accept a bed of sickness. Perhaps I'll accept a more conventional form of life, as it is lived by others. Perhaps I'll accept death. That is God's business. What matters is that I've *left all the nets* that I had inside of me; I've gathered them up and *let them down* (cf. Mt 4.20; Lk 5.4-5). Finally, I've rid myself of them entirely, so that I can be alone with God and receive Him.

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[15] See Arch. Aimilianos, "Catechism on Prayer," 213-214.

A monk is someone who has been sent by God, and because God rules the universe, it follows that the monk is a universal man.[16] He requires no other justification for his life other than the fact that he is a monk. As a man who is called and sent forth by God, the monk is the prophet of his time and place. It is he who transmits, and is himself the bearer of, the Word of God. He is God's apostle, because he has surrendered himself to God. God may now ask of him what He pleases. Because he is now a universal man, his existence embraces all of humanity.

When I become an apostle, when God calls me, what happens? The same thing that happened with the other apostles, who, for three years, and forever thereafter, lived with and listened to the Lord. And everyone who is elected to be an apostle — from the first Matthias to the last (cf. Acts 1.26) — will have to be like those who first went with Him, who lived alongside Him, and listened to Him.

It follows that I've now become capable of listening to God and understanding Him. *I have heard Your voice and I have understood Your words* (Hab 3.1-2). I acquire internal gifts, spiritual senses, to hear and understand God's message. This kind of understanding is something that enters deeply into your being, into your heart, like something you've eaten; it is something you feel, like a portion of food that's passed into your stomach.

I'm now in a position to hear and understand. I'm now at God's disposal, because, having been selected for a mission, I need to be trained, as was the case with the other apostles, so that I can be fully at God's disposal, and not *disobey or dispute* (cf. Is 50.5). I'm at God's disposal. It's particularly at this point that I become aware of the difficulties involved in being an apostle. Now I begin to see the difficulties that accompany the prophetic charisma that I've received. Many times it will seem unbearable, and I'll ask to be relieved of it. But when I acquire true understanding, my knowledge will become a source of love, because I discover that this yoke is easy, and that my cross is light (cf. Mat 11.30), since Christ carries it for me. In the final analysis, it is Christ Who speaks, and Christ Who acts. It is He Who walks ahead of me. With this intimacy, with this union, I reach the final stage of mystical experience that can be attained in this life: the daily experience of death.[17] And this experience of death is the extension of my life into eternity, and thus an anticipation of my eschatological state.

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[16] Here, and in what follows, the Elder uses the words "universal" (*oikoumenikos*) and "catholic" (*katholikos*) interchangeably, although they have been uniformly translated as "universal." On the "catholic consciousness" of the Fathers of the Church, see Fr. George Florovsky, "The Catholicity of the Church" in his *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (= Collected Works, vol 1) (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1972), 37-55, esp. 42-44 (= "The Transfiguration of Personality").

Now I begin to desire to die. Why? Because I have come to live so closely with God. He's made me an apostle, and now I'm alive and running, but all my running is after Him. And thus I run when I'm in the cave; I run when I'm at prayer; I run when I'm reading; I run when I'm talking to people; I run when I'm eating; I run when I'm asleep. I now do all things with Christ: together with Him I dwell with the Father; together with Him I share in the life of the Spirit. When this happens, it's only natural that my soul should cry out: "How long shall I remain in this place of darkness?" (cf. Mt 4.16). The light of this world has faded. Compared to God's love, it now looks like darkness; the world's "truths" now appear empty and false. I see *through the glass* and wish that it could be removed (1 Cor 13.12), and thus I say: "How long, God, shall I be here? When shall I come to You at last? When will this present moment become eternity? When will the limits of space give way to Heaven?"

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[17] Compare St. Athanasios, *The Life of St. Antony* 19: "It is good for us to meditate on the Apostle's statement *I die daily* (1 Cor 15.31). If we too live our lives like this — as though we were going to die each day — we will not sin. I am saying this so that if we awaken each day and think: 'I will not be alive until evening,' and again when we are about to go to sleep, if we think, 'I am not going to wake up,' then we will not take for granted that our life is so certain when we know that it is measured out each day by Providence," ibid., 91: "Live as though you were going to die each day" (Vivian, 103, 251); and Evagrios, *Praktikos* 29: "Our saintly teacher (i.e., St. Makarios the Egyptian) with his great experience of the practical life used to say: 'The monk must every day hold himself ready as though he were to die tomorrow, and in turn must treat the body as though he would have to live with it for many years" (Sinckewicz, 102-103).

This desire for death makes me renew, on a daily basis, the eternal pact that I've made with God, my eternal vow of consecration. And both this pact and this consecration become increasingly intertwined, and together they serve as the continuous renewal of my nuptial bond with God. Thus the feeling of "How long?" continues and intensifies, and my whole desire is to *depart and be with Christ* (Phil 1.23).

But I have not yet departed, and thus I express my desire to do so by means of my martyrdom. I express it with my devotion, with my vigils, and with *far greater labors* than these (2 Cor 11.23). And I want these labors to increase all the time. With these labors, with the weakening of my body, with my fasting, my lack of sleep — with the illness I suffer as a result of sleeping on the ground, and from vigils and fasting, with all the tribulations I'm subject to — with all this I try to bring time under my control, until I master it and make it disappear, so that eternity may enter my being.

Thus I live *in greater labors.* In some sense, these efforts of mine help to *supply what is lacking* (cf. 1 Cor 16.17) in terms of the leap that I am as yet unable to make into eternity. My desire for daily death is expressed in these daily labors. It is expressed, in other words, by my attachment to God and by my separation from the world. And it is my degree of attachment and separation that enables me to see how universal I am, how united I am to everyone, to what extent everyone is in my heart. And yet, all the time, my wish is to depart from them; to go as far away as I can into the desert; to be alone with Him, Whom my heart has chosen and Who has chosen me.

And the more I withdraw, the more I realize that I am united *with all the saints* (Eph 3.18), united with the whole of the Church, indissolubly, inseparably, like someone who's been chained to someone else, not in condemnation, but as the link to my divinization, justification, and salvation. Because if I'm to live, if I'm to be justified, to become a citizen of heaven, it will be because I'm firmly attached to the Church, because I've been *grafted on to the vine* (cf. Rom 11.17; Jn 15.1-8). And I experience this as a desire for flight from the world, which expresses my exclusive attachment to God, which is a spiritual rather than a psychological state of solitude.

There is a third characteristic that *supplies what is lacking*, and is also the result of my daily death: it is the form — and the formation — of Christ, which I discover taking place within myself. It is the active forming of Christ, continually united to me, and growing within me (cf. Gal 4.19). Christ assumes form and takes shape within me. Does He do this without changing? We can say that He's constantly changing form within us, because His form becomes increasingly true and complete. Just as the divine child changed form in the womb of the Theotokos, so too that which the Spirit has planted within me continuously grows to completion.[18] And the form that I carry within myself is nothing other than my personal and indissoluble experience of God, which is Christ Himself within me, Christ alive within me.

Now my whole being, my whole bearing, and my whole life have nothing to say, other than: *I know nothing but Christ* (cf. 1 Cor 2.2). Christ now has you so firmly within His grasp that you can think of nothing but God. For example, if you're experiencing acute pain in your stomach, you'll forget everything and everybody, and sit there by yourself, doubled over. Christ becomes a pain like that: a labor pain, pregnant with redemption. Or it's like having the whole world around you, and then you receive some good news, at which point you forget about everything else: all you can think of is the good news. God is good tidings of this sort, and that's why we say: "Truly I know nothing but Christ." We forget everything else, we become ignorant of all other things, and through this sacred oblivion, through this mystical ignorance, we reach the heights of knowledge and of the living experience of God.

IV

To sum up the things we've said, and to bring our reflections to a conclusion, let us consider the monastic life as both a state of "being" and a process of "becoming."

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[18] See above, chap. 1, n. 19, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3: "The child Jesus born within us advances by different ways in those who receive Him with *wisdom, in age, and in grace* (cf. Lk 2.52). He is not the same in every person, but is present according to the measure of the person receiving Him. He shows Himself according to each one's capacity. He comes either as an infant, or a child advancing in age, or as one fully grown" (McCambley, 86-87). On the question of human "measure" and "capacity," see below, chap. 5, n. 1.

Monastic life is first of all a state of being, a state of existence, because it's a life of solitude, a life that is completely personal. If someone wants to be a real monk, he must learn to live as a person in solitude with God. Today you have your abbot and you live comfortably. Whatever happens to you, you'll tell him about it. Tomorrow, however, you won't have your abbot, you won't have your elder, and no other elder can take his place, even if he was the most rotten, the most insignificant, and the most imperfect of men. How, then, will I be able to survive, if in my personal life I have not managed to live in a state of solitude with God?

Today, I am your teacher, but I won't be here tomorrow. There'll come times of sorrow, times of great joy, and times of trials and temptations. How will you survive them if you haven't learned to live by yourself with God? And this kind of learning is a process that is direct and personal: you should know how to be taught, how to study; you should know how to recognize and understand things; how to receive revelations from God. In order for me to survive, I have to learn today how to live tomorrow, because tomorrow I'll be on my own. Unless I learn today how to be satisfied and joyful, preparing myself for the possibility of living alone tomorrow, I'll never be able to do it. And then, I'll probably just go from one storm to another, becoming a problem both for the Church and above all to myself.

My life as a monk is a life of solitude, in the sense of being an *enclosed garden* (Song 4.12), which will be opened only by God. I shall be a *sealed spring* (Song 4.12), which will be allowed to flow only for Him. God, in other words, is able to enter into my life, and I am able to emerge only through Him, for His sake. That is what it means to live a life of solitude.

Secondly, monastic life, as we said, is an apostolic life. It's a life without a will of one's own, without fixed destinations, without specific directions. No act of mine, not even the most perfect, makes me holy before God, as much as this apostolic consciousness, the consciousness that I am, in my deepest being, sent by God, that I am His envoy. God can say to me at any time: "Get up from here and go there. Leave that and do this." As a result, every present moment of my life must be a moment of preparedness, of readiness, so that I may always be able to be an apostle. At the same time, however, the man who is to be an apostle must be able to survive, and not be someone who moves about – be it within a cave, on the road, on the mountains, or in the valleys – solely to infect others with his emptiness, or with his personal problems, his anxiety, his sins, or whatever else it may be.

To be an apostle means to stand before God and to speak with God, discussing these matters with Him, as we said before. I'll choose a path of survival, and then I'll show it to God. And at one point, while I'm going for a stroll with God and we're chatting, I'll tell Him, with boldness: "God, this is what I have in mind. Now You do with me whatever You will." And God will fortify my weakness, alter the direction of my thoughts, and make me a new man; or He'll accept me as His own creation, recognizing it, and bringing it to perfection from the place in which He finds it.

Thirdly, the monastic life is a universal life, because it is a life lived in the universal Church. It is a life that has its source in the Church, which ends in the Church, and which is lived for the Church. There is nothing about such a life that remains outside of the Church, because the monastic life constitutes a single act, and such acts are justified only by faith, and faith means union with the Church.

Fourthly, the monastic life is a spiritual life, because it begins in the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 3.3), and it is the Holy Spirit Who brings it to perfection. And so my life is an uninterrupted series of mystical encounters with the Spirit, throughout the day and throughout the night. And with the Spirit, through the Son, monastic life is a progression. What food is for my body, the Spirit is for my life. The Spirit is the foundation of my very existence, He gives life to all flesh — "By the Holy Spirit, every soul is given life"[19] — the Spirit is so essential, because He acts so unstintingly within me. This is the monastic life.

This is why, many times, after we've discussed things, I haven't always agreed to give you what you wanted. When I could see that you desired something, I did not consent to it, even if what you wanted was holy and pure. When I could see that you wanted it so very much, how intensely you were pursuing it, I refused, because it was not a perfect abandonment to the breath of the Spirit. And it is only this union with the Spirit, only this spiritual synthesis — which is a walking and moving together with the Spirit — that shows that we're monks. This is the monastic life, our daily mode of "becoming," our way of life. It is, as we said in the beginning, the consciousness of both our own weakness and our need for the Holy Spirit, the *power from on high.*

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[19] See the commentary on this hymn verse, taken from the *Anabathmoi* of the fourth tone, by St. Nikodemos Hagioreites, *Nea Klimax* (Thessaloniki: Basil Regopoulos, 1976), 161-162: "The hymnographer states that every rational soul, by the power of the Holy Spirit, receives life, and life in abundance, both through the simple fact of creation, and also through the act of recreation, that is, through holy baptism. Assisted by the Holy Spirit, the soul is cleansed of its sins, which cloud its vision like so much filth, and prevent the intellect from contemplating the mysteries of the Spirit. In the same way that sick or damaged eyes cannot bear the sight of the sun, neither can the sinful, impassioned intellect behold the supersubstantial solar disc of the Father, nor the ray of the Son, nor the light of the Holy Spirit" (in Greek).

I told you that we stopped this morning at the place in the reading where it says: *Stay here until that power comes from on high, which will overshadow and fortify your weakness* (cf. Lk 24.49). We return now to our weakness, because we're likely to have forgotten it, in which case we'll have accomplished nothing.

Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit. But how can our weakness contain the uncontainable Spirit? Only when it comes to abide, first and foremost, in true silence.[20] And this silence is the soul's deep concern about its future; its anxiety over the aridity, desolation, and infertility which it feels apart from its Bridegroom, to Whom it must be joined in wedlock, because no one lives alone but only when joined to another. That is my sole concern, and that is why I remain silent, why my entire being is hushed, awaiting the arrival of the Spirit. Much talking, noise, discussions — including those concerned with the most elevated topics, let alone about everyday problems — all of these divert us from our monastic life and impede us on our spiritual journey. What we require is silence, the kind that cries in the wilderness at night. I spend my days and nights alone in the desert, like the *sparrow that sits alone on the house top,* waiting for its mate (cf. Ps 101.8). This is true silence. Any other kind is simply a void, an empty space, the negation of sound, which, in the end, hears and knows nothing beyond the world. But true silence is the threshold of the mystery of the world to come.[21]

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[20] On the role of silence in prayer, see Arch. Aimilianos, "Catechism on Prayer," 205-206.

[21] St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 65: "Silence is the mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments of this world" (*Homilies,* 321).

This silence, then, is the place where my monastic life can take place. It is the hushed *upper room* (cf. Acts 1.13) of the heart, into which the Spirit can descend, *like the rush of a mighty wind* (Acts 2.2). There is, moreover, a second such place, namely: my autonomy and independence. Let us understand what these words mean. A monk can never live without obedience; he cannot exist as a being sufficient unto himself. He is made complete by the will of others, and especially by the will of his elder, which may be biased, unjust, imperfect, and whatever else you can imagine. In any case, it will be human.

But it is precisely the act of placing myself into the hands of the other that demonstrates my self-denial, my self-abandonment, as a result of which my monastic life may seem to be irrational and illogical. Why? Because I accept what other people tell me, even though it may well be absurd. But as a monk, I accept it, and take no account of the truth or meaning of the actions of others. I simply accept what they tell me freely and with joy.

When I am able to do this, I acquire a freedom; I become free, above all from the incubus of my own will, of my own being. Now I can live as an autonomous person, because I've freed myself from the greatest force there is: my own willfulness. Now there's nothing to stop my free and independent progress. And this is important, because everyone follows his own road, revealed to him by God. The Magi started out to return by the same road on which they had come, but God showed them *another road* (cf. Mt 2.12). One man chooses a throne, and God escorts him into exile. Another man chooses the desert, and God places him on a throne. One man chooses a hermitage in the wilderness, and God leads him into a cenobium, and so on. I have to be ready to walk on the road that God will show me.

My road may even be one filled with passions, because of the weakness I have within me, which I drag around like an ancestral curse. From such a road I may hope to be delivered, but only as a free gift from the Holy God, Who has *set us free for freedom* (cf. Gal 5.1).

I have to learn how to live with others, and with myself, wherever God puts me, because no one can choose his own road. Moreover, we have to learn how to live in unfavorable conditions, amidst difficulties, as if they did not exist. Because if you're forever reacting to, or simply unable to live in, the place where you happen to be, you won't be able to live at all, because you'll be revolting against what God has placed, or allowed to be placed, in your path.

Thirdly, freedom goes hand in hand with joy, and thus the toil and labor of monastic life is justified only when it is full of good cheer, full of freedom, and full of joy: when it is fully conscious, in other words, of the presence of God. Otherwise, from a human perspective at least, it's nothing but a pointless martyrdom, a life sentence. But such a martyrdom becomes a witness to God when it is a foretaste of immortality, a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven, of the unspeakable joy of paradise. It's in that sense, within that framework, that my life can be one of labor and travail.

It follows, then, that my monastic life must be lived within silence and self-sufficiency, in the sense that it's sufficient for me to live where I am, and as I am, today. In order to do so, I have to accept everything from my surroundings and particularly from my elder.

Fourthly, monastic life is a life of reflection and recollection. But not for the purposes of self-examination or self-critique; not in order to see where I'm going, or what I'm doing. Instead, it's a recollection for the purpose of listening freely to God, in order to understand the principles of creation, enfolded within the creator. What does "understanding" mean here? It means to organize and arrange things within my intellect. In order to put one thing here and another there, I must have knowledge of these things, an accurate perception of them, so that I am at peace and free to continue on my way to God. Real understanding, therefore, is the placement of God in my heart. And this is also a kind of "recollection" in which "I am collected," which means that I am attracted to something and absorbed by it, hence I accept it, and I love it. This recollection means to love God, to be in communion with Him.

A life such as this can receive the Spirit, and it can grant me the true life of which we spoke, that is, the monastic life, which is the precursor of eternity.

I would like to end, my children, with a question posed by the Apostle Paul: *Have you received the Holy Spirit?* (Acts 19.13). Have we received the Holy Spirit? If we look at ourselves, I fear that we haven't, no matter how many times we've said: "Heavenly King, Comforter, Spirit of Truth . . . come and dwell within us."

Today we celebrated the feast of the Ascension. This means that God has placed us in the upper room, to wait. Our presence in this upper room indicates our acceptance of the fact that we've not yet received the Holy Spirit acting within us, crying aloud within us, giving us life. Let us turn to Him, placing our lives before Him, so that we may receive Him, for *every gift* (Jas 1.17) begins with Him, and, apart from Him, by ourselves, *we can do nothing* (Jn 5.5)

Have you received the Holy Spirit? With those words I stopped the morning reading, because I felt that we had not. If we were all to gather together, including the brothers who are away, I'm not sure that even then we would have the Spirit. But it would be foolish to do nothing more than go on weeping about it. What we've got to do is stop groaning. We've got to reach the point where, when the Spirit does come, you no longer say "Come!" but you sit and look at Him and He looks at you. You rejoice in Him, and He in you.

5. "HAVE WE RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT?"*

Christ is Risen! It is such a joy to be with you today. Holy Week, the celebration of which we have just completed, is surely the most beautiful time in the entire ecclesiastical year. Who could deny the splendor and magnificence of our feasts? They are God's own feasts, and make our hearts rejoice in Jesus Christ. Although Holy Week has now come and gone, the hymns of the Passion continue to resound within our ears, mingling with the cries of our heart, which we offer up to the Risen Lord.

Each of us, to a greater or lesser extent, celebrated those feasts and took something from them. What did we take? To this question, each of us will have a different answer, because even though the Church is a unity, it is a unity of distinct personalities. It is an assembly of persons, each one of them whole and complete, standing before God, and not an anonymous, undifferentiated mass. Thus it is entirely possible for all of us to be gathered together in church, to be standing next to each other and chanting in unison, but for each of us to get something different out of the experience. And what each of us receives is known only to that person, only to the *spirit of the man, which is in him,* as well as to God the Spirit, Who *searches the depths* of our own spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2.10-11).

What, then, did we receive? In the first place, we received what we prepared ourselves to receive. Whatever food you've prepared, that's what you'll eat. Whatever bed you've made, that's the one you're going to lie on. Whatever you've sown in your field, that's what you'll reap. Throughout the liturgical year, then, we receive what we have prepared ourselves to receive. God will not bring something to fruition that we have not had a hand in cultivating; and what we cultivate, that which we expect to bear fruit, grows directly from the seeds we've sown within ourselves. Consequently, we'll get whatever it is our heart has prepared for itself. One person will get God; another will be moved by the chanting; another will gain a few insights; someone else the kingdom of heaven. Each will receive whatever it is he desired.

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* Delivered at the Sacred Monastery of Simonos Petras, 8 April, 1977.

In each instance, the preparation of the heart is fundamental. And this is not an activity that we engage in only on the eve of great feasts. It is an unceasing activity, which the soul accomplishes within itself, making it holy, chosen, and able to receive God, or whatever God chooses to give it. God is as infinitely rich as we are poor, and thus we have need of Him (cf. 2 Cor 8.9). But what we find depends on the way we seek for it. The *way* we see God, in other words, determines what we shall see *in* God. This is why I say: what you've prepared yourself for is exactly what you'll receive. One person cultivates the wind, and reaps nothing. Another prepares to receive the Holy Spirit. It all depends.

We also receive, not simply what we've prepared ourselves to receive, but what we're capable of receiving: what we're able to contain within ourselves. He who receives is the one who is *able to contain what he receives within himself* (Mt 19.12). We receive, then, whatever we're capable of understanding; in proportion to the idea of God that we have.[1] For example, I receive Holy Communion, and so do you, and so does somebody else. But each of us perceives the sacred gifts differently; each of us has a greater or lesser understanding of them, and thus we receive them in a manner that is distinctive to each. Our understanding of something is part of the way we experience it, and cannot be separated from it, so much so that the experience of God and His kingdom is a form of understanding, for it is the experience of true knowledge (cf. Jn 8.32; Lk 1.77; 1 Cor 1.5).

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[1] Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Various Texts* 95: "God reveals Himself to each person according to each person's mode of conceiving Him. To those whose aspiration transcends the complex structure of matter, and whose psychic powers are fully integrated in a single, unceasing movement around God, He reveals Himself as Unity and Trinity. To those whose aspiration is lim-

God, of course, is not like an object within our ordinary horizon of understanding. But He can nevertheless be received by us, interact with us, according to our capacity for knowledge and our power of perception. This is why He says: *I am the Truth* (Jn 14.6), and teaches us that *He is the Light* (cf. Jn 8.12). This is why the more you learn to cultivate within yourself the knowledge of God, the more you can receive Him in the fullness of His truth and perfection. As we said, each of us receives Him according to the capacities of our heart, mind, and will. We are all drawing from the same well, but we drink different water, depending on our thirst.

Our capacity for God depends very much on the simplicity of our hearts, on the purity of our nights, on our spiritual reading and meditation, and on the degree to which we empty ourselves. It de-

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ited to the complex structure of matter, and whose psychic powers are not integrated, He reveals Himself not as He is but as they are, showing that they are completely caught in the material dualism whereby the physical world is conceived as composed of matter and form" (*Philokalia*, 2:186); ibid., 96: "The *manifestation of the Spirit* (1 Cor 12.7) is given according to the measure of every man's faith . . . thus every believer is receptive to the energy of the Spirit in a way that corresponds to his degree of faith and state of soul" (ibid.); and id., *Third Century on Various Texts* 34-35: "In each of us the energy of the Spirit is made manifest according to the measure of his faith (cf. Rom 12.6)" (*Philokalia*, 2:217-218).

pends on our self-emptying; a *kenosis* of our substance and being (cf. Phil 2.7). And this is the great mystery of human freedom, which God never violates. We are filled to the degree that we are empty, to the degree that we voluntarily make room within ourselves for God. This is why we say: "You receive as much as you can contain."

Moreover, with respect to the holy days of Christ's Passion, we can also say that we received according to the measure that we suffered. Those feasts mark the sufferings of God in the flesh, and it is only by suffering that we can understand, participate in, and *complete the sufferings of the Lord* (2 Cor 1.5-7), Who *left us an example* (1 Pet 2.21) in the form of His Passion, which He Himself experienced.

If we suffered, if we knelt in prayer, if our life became a real cry, if — to put it in human terms — our life was really a terrible trial, a martyrdom so extreme as to be a rejection of life itself, an abandonment and annihilation of the self, then we would so much more be able to receive God.

We also receive according to the measure that we have loved. Such love is closely linked to the depths of our being, to our experience of pain and suffering, which reveal the depths of our love. If we are unwilling to suffer, we will not be able to love. Such love is also linked to the flight of the soul, to the distance it keeps from the world, which is also a kind of suffering, because it wants to ascend to God, since it has no peace apart from God's love, by which it is crowned and united to God.

It follows, then, that the closer you are to God, the more you love Him. And our desire for God knows no satiety; it is something that can never be completed or exhausted.[2] Love finds its perfec-

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2. On this theme, see St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 5-10: "The per-

tion, not in this life, but in the next, and this means that perfect love should always be a perfect dissatisfaction. "To love" means to find no final satisfaction in the things of the world, and thus it expresses both our movement toward, and the distance which still remains, between us and God. The extent of our love, then, can be measured by the duration of our weeping. It can be measured by the extent to which we've been reduced to nothing in the infinity of God, and by our attempts to make God our own and to comprehend Him. And this measure can be grasped, not by any intellectual calculation, but only through the experience of suffering and love.

Our love for God is union with God, because it results from a certain kind of knowledge. And knowledge of God is acquired by participation in God, by making our existence an eating and drinking of God, an active communion in His life. The more our existence has been leavened by God, the more we love Him. And the more we love Him, the more we receive from Him.

So, the more we've prepared, the more room we've made, the more we've suffered, the more we've loved, the more we've cried

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fection of all things consists in their limit, in the fact that they have both a beginning and an end. But in the case of virtue, its one limit of perfection is the fact that it has no limit, and thus stopping in the race of virtue marks the beginning of the race of evil. Whoever pursues virtue pursues God, who is unlimited and infinite, and thus their desire to participate in Him has no limit" (cf. Malherbe, 30-31); and id., *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 6, where he states that the "end of the bride's advancements becomes a beginning for further advancement. . . . It is right for the soul to be glad since she has reached the summit of her desires. But this limit of her attainment is the beginning of her hope for what lies beyond [and thus we should] realize that all perfection of knowledge attainable by human nature is only the beginning of a desire for more lofty things" (McCambley, 129-131). See also above, chap. 3, n. 18.

aloud — wept and lamented without restraint — the more we'll have received God Himself. Needless to say, all of this remains hidden behind a cheerful countenance, beneath a smile, beneath the depths of true joy, beneath an entire life that witnesses to God by its tranquility, love, and truth, because we know that, no matter what happens, God for us is everything.

Human life is nothing more than a movement to, or away from, God. It is a journey, a progression, which God alone knows. For us, our life consists of traces left by the Holy Spirit, as He moves among us and breathes within us (cf. Rom 8.9-17; 2 Cor 6.16). And when the Spirit comes and dwells within us, we arrive at the end of time, the limit of "now," which is a particle of time that in a sense is non-existent, because as soon as you utter it, as soon as you become aware of it, it vanishes. And so we have arrived at the present moment, which has absolutely no meaning at all except *for as long as it is called "today"* (Heb 3.13), because who can say that he knows the limits of his life?

On the one hand, then, we have the "time" of man, which tends toward non-existence. On the other, we have the timeless time of God, which is His *walking about among us* (cf. 2 Cor 6.16; Lev 26.12); the touch of His Spirit in our lives, His active presence in our midst. But how can this timeless time become real for us? How can we arrive at that particular moment of time, which is not a limit, or a closure, but a revelation, an uncovering of the place where we stand with respect to God? What are the signs that God is active within us? How, in other words, does our capacity for God reveal itself in our lives? Not just in our spiritual lives, but in our everyday life, our daily routine? How is the Spirit manifested in us, and how do we project the life of the Spirit to others? When can we say that we've really received the Holy Spirit? Perhaps we'll have to accept the fact that, throughout our lives, we'll continue to ask ourselves: *Have we received the Holy Spirit?* (Acts 19.2).

It may be that, after many years, we'll discover that we have not received the Holy Spirit. That's terrible, but true. And that's precisely why I want to stress that, on the basis of our external behavior, on the basis of our everyday routine, we *can* judge whether or not we have the Spirit.

Thus I'd like to mention three or four things, not especially profound or complicated, but actually very simple. They are stages of the spiritual life, each connected to the other. In order to describe them, I'll use words and expressions from Holy Scripture, because that is always the best thing to do.

Let's begin. One sign of the Holy Spirit's presence within us is what Scripture calls *joyfulness of heart* (Ps 12.6).[3] What does this mean? In the first place, it signifies outward, external joy, happiness, and rejoicing, such as rejoicing in the festive joy of the firstborn. But *joyfulness of heart* also expresses the spirit of a man who longs for God, and who, within that longing, feels God's touch, and that touch makes him rejoice, because it is communion with God.

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[3] See also: Ps 83.3, 118.111; Sir 34.28; Acts 2.46. In Scripture, the word "joyfulness" (*agalliasis*) denotes spiritual "exultation" and "fervent delight" in response to the presence and love of God, especially in the context of liturgical worship. It is thus joy experienced in the celebration and praise of God, in which often all creation (e.g., earth, sky, mountains) is called to participate (cf. Ps 95.11). It has, moreover, an additional, eschatological sense, denoting the joy of the last time, already made present in the liturgy (cf. Ps 95.11, 96.1, 8, 125.2; Is 12.6, 25.9). *Agalliasis* is closely related to the word *chara* (also translated as "joy," cf. Mt 5.12; Lk 1.14; Jn 8.56; 1 Pt 1.8; Rev 19.7), and both words express the unspeakable delight experienced by man in his definitive encounter with God.

Joyfulness of heart is the undiminished sense you have that God is with you. It is a feeling of complete assurance, a total entrusting of your self to God.[4] It's that magnificent sense of openness, such as we experience in states of rest and relaxation, a feeling of renewal that a person has when he is certain that, where he is, God is too. As such it is the feeling of a man who realizes that he is no longer alone, that there is not even a single moment when he is on his own. *Joyfulness of heart*, then, is the feeling, the deeper experience, that a person has when he knows that God is with him at every moment. As the Psalmist says: *Our help is of the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, our king* (Ps 88.19).

"Help" here does not simply mean receiving support or assistance in one form or another. It means that the Lord Himself is here, with me, at my side. Thus it says: *Our help is of the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, our king.* With these words, the Psalmist places himself within the larger community as it stands before God. We would say that he places himself both within the Church and within the inner sanctuary of God's presence.

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[4] In its most basic sense, the Greek word for "assurance" (*plerophoria*) means "to fill," to be "satisfied," or to be "filled to overflowing" with a rich fullness (cf. Jn 1.14). In the New Testament, it denotes the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, and of history itself, in the person of Christ. It also has the sense of "complete certainty" (cf. Rom 4.21, 14.5; Col 2.2, 4.12; 1 Thess 1.5; Heb 6.11, 10.22), which is understood to be a divine gift of unshakeable, inner certitude regarding matters of faith. St. Basil, for example, in his work *Concerning Faith*, says that: "faith is a whole-hearted assent to church teaching with full conviction of the truth of what is publicly taught by the grace of God. This faith Abraham had, as is testified in the words: *he did not waver through lack of trust, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God; most fully assured (plerophoretheis) that whatsoever God has promised He is able to perform* (Rom 4.20-21)" (FOTC 9:59). Among later ascetic writers, the term increasingly denotes the experienced reality of fullness of life in the Holy Spirit, of which the most well-known example is the *Great Letter* of St. Makarios of Egypt (PG 34:409-442).

When someone knows that God is his king, he has a feeling of assurance and certitude. God is his king. But that is not all, for God is not simply *his* king, but the *king of Israel*, the king of all of us. Thus his own, personal sense of assurance is situated within the greater assurance he experiences as a member of the Body of Christ. Such a man experiences, not simply his own certitude, but that of the Church. It is not his own joy he experiences, but the joy of the Church. Not his own eternity, but the Church's. He is what he is because he has been incorporated into the Church. He is within Israel, and within Israel is the king. There is no other way to understand the words: *Israel, our king.*

How beautifully the Psalmist presents this. The Lord is with me, the Lord is here! Why? Because Israel is here, and where Israel is, there you'll find the king — *our king.* What pride, what honor, what certitude! David is so overwhelmed by this that he wishes he could die, because death itself no longer means anything in the face of such certitude (cf. Rom 6.9). Nothing, not even death, can separate us from God (cf. Rom 8.35), because we are within Israel, and Israel is within God.

In speaking of *joyfulness of heart,* we should say a word about the nature of the heart in question. What sort of heart is it that feels this *joyfulness*? A broken heart: a heart that breaks itself open because of the majesty that it feels. When a person lives as a true member of the Church, against which the *gates of Hell cannot prevail* (Mt 16.18); when he lives in the state of majesty that is proper to him, *then* he attains his fulfillment, his authentic self-expression, the revelation of his own true self. True self-discovery occurs only within the consciousness of the Church. Becoming one with the

Body of the Church, and living within its assurance and certitude, enables you to be free from changes, anxiety, and sadness. Troubles simply come and go, passing by like waves, but they will never be able to drown you. You have become like the shore, unmoved by the pounding of the sea. The waves will come and crash all around, but you no longer fear them. Instead, they remind you of the endless waves of the Holy Spirit rising and falling within you.

Your afflictions point towards Him Who is beyond all afflictions (cf. Jn 16.33). And your joys — which are also waves — point to Him Who is the source of joy, and so all things reveal God to you. Thus the heart rejoices, because, whatever happens, whatever it touches, wherever it finds itself, it discovers everywhere and in all things the king Himself, Israel itself, the Lord. All things become an opportunity to find and discover God anew.

This sense of joy, moreover, remains stable and well-grounded. It can't be lost. If it is lost, it means estrangement from God, a resurgence of the self, and thus the loss of God. And that would be a kind of negative martyrdom, which has another, opposite momentum. It would be a movement to hell, which God would allow us to undergo, so that we might recall the paradise we'd lost, the paradise of *joyfulness* that we had before. A single sin is capable of sending us into this hell, subjecting us to this kind of martyrdom, depriving us of our *joyfulness.* This is why, as we've said on other occasions, the heart rejoices when it says: *Restore to me the joyfulness of Your salvation* (Ps 50.14).

In losing this *joyfulness,* a person loses sight of God, along with the feeling of His *help.* He loses, in other words, the consciousness of his place in the Church, his sense of membership in the Body of Christ. When this happens, he immediately becomes a nothing, something that has been divided, isolated, non-existent in the eyes of God. God can't reach a person in such a place, for he has fallen into the deepest darkness, shrouded by a dreadful cloud. But when a man is able to pass through such a martyrdom, remaining mindful of God and worshipping Him, it will always bring him directly to God Himself.

Even, then, from the depths of a hell like this — as well as from the depths of our sin and from the pain that the soul feels apart from God — we can continue to cry out to God, Who can raise us back up to our former position. He can restore us, *place the ring back on our finger* (Lk 15.22), and *betroth us to the Spirit* (2 Cor 1.22), which is a guarantee that we will again come to possess *joyfulness of heart. Joyfulness of heart*, then, is the principal characteristic of the man who lives in the Holy Spirit.

After this, we have a second sign, called the *alteration of the reins* (Ps 72.21), a phrase which is also translated as the *alteration of the kidneys* or *loins* (cf. Ps 37.8).[5] What, in the language of the Bible, are the *reins* or *kidneys*? They are, in the first place, a vital and organic part of the body. In symbolic terms, they allude to that aspect of a man's life which remains secret and concealed. They represent the things about us that God alone understands. Thus a person's *reins* or *loins* are symbols of his inner feelings and desires. They express a man's deepest feelings, his inward being; what he has within himself, as it stands in direct relation to God. The Psalmist describes many things having to do with the *loins* of man: how they feel pain, sorrow, or are torn asunder and loosened. Scripture is full of such expressions, which describe those moments when man sins, causing the Holy Spirit to depart.[6]

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[5] At issue here are two words from the Greek text of the Old Testament: "kidney" (*nephros*), and "loins" (*psoai*), which designate virtually the same organs and/or regions of the body. Thus Ps 72.21 (mentioned above): *For my heart has rejoiced, and my kidneys (nephroi) have been gladdened.* Identified here with the "heart," the kidney was readily associated with the intellect, as in St. Cyril of Alexandria: "The kidney (*nephros*), which filters poison from the body, is a type of the intellect's power of discernment" (PG 68:1028A). Scriptural references to *psoai* are fewer, foremost among them being Ps 37.8 (*My loins are filled with mockings*). Note that in the Greek translation of the Old Testament produced by Aquila (a second-century Jewish scholar), the text of Ps 37.8 was corrupted by a copyist to read: *My soul is filled with mockings,* due to the similarity between the Greek words for "loins" (*psoai*, or *psyai*) and "soul" (*psyche*). English translations of *psoai* vary from "kidneys," to "reins" (*ren* being the Latin word for "kidney"), to "loins." Among the early Greek medical writers, the *psoai* designated either the

When God returns to act within that person, his *loins* are said to be at peace, tranquil, or in a state of health. We're all aware of the changes that the Spirit makes in our lives, brought about, as it were, by the *rush of a mighty wind* (Acts 2.2). Indeed, without such changes, it is not possible to imagine human life in the Spirit.

The fact that the Old Testament describes the Spirit as wind — a turbulent wind that can hurl a man to the ground — is not without significance here.[7] It is a basic truth that *the Spirit blows about like the wind* (Jn 3.8), and wherever He blows He leaves His traces. He leaves something of Himself behind. When the wind blows on you, you feel its gusts, and, if the wind is hot, you will feel yourself getting warmer and warmer. That's how it is in our inward life when *the breath of the Spirit blows* (Jn 3.8).

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muscles of the loins; the upper and lower abdominal regions and the regions about the hips, including the kidneys as well as the generative organs.

[6] See, for example: Job 16.13; Ps 7.9, 15.7, 25.2, 72.21, 138.13; Wis 1.6; Jer 11.20, 12.2, 17.10, 20.12; Lam 3.13; 1 Mac 2.24.

[7] See, for example: 2 Kg 22.16; Job 4.9; Ps 10.7, 17.15, 47.7, 108.25; and Wis 5.23.

In this way, the *alteration of the reins* signifies the transformation that a person undergoes when the Spirit establishes Himself in that person's life. It is a physical, external phrase that signifies the inward renewal and restoration of spiritual activity, along with all those profound changes the Holy Spirit brings to a man's inner life, distinct from the feeling we were talking about earlier. Something has come and settled on me, like so much dust: it marks me, and changes my appearance. I'm sitting in the darkness (cf. Lk 1.79), when a ray of light falls upon me, and I become brightened, luminous. That's exactly how it is when the Spirit comes.[8]

I sleep, wake up, sing, eat, go about my business, do whatever, and at the same time, the wind fans me, the light illumines me, everything drenches me, embraces me. That's exactly what the Spirit of God does. And what emerges thereafter is altered, transformed, different, and new, compared to what it had been previously. In terms of my essential being, my human nature, I remain the same, but my constitution (*hypostasis*) as a person has been altered. This is a *personal* transformation, *not* the transubstantiation of human nature. It is not a change on the level of essence. I remain the same, but I am nonetheless transformed into something else. I'm transformed into that which is changing me: the Holy Spirit. A new person, a spiritual *hypostasis*,[9] is awakened, and I partake of the Spirit and His gifts. This is communion, then, not with the Word, but with the Spirit.

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[8] See St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.22: "The Holy Spirit is the source of sanctification and spiritual light, and the illumination He gives is nothing other than Himself. Everything that partakes of His grace is filled with joy according to its capacity: the capacity of its nature, not of His power" (Anderson, 43-44). See also the passage ascribed to St. Basil cited by St. Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 3.1.34: "The prize of virtue is to become like God, and to be illumined by means of His purest light, becoming a child of that day, which no darkness interrupts, for it (i.e., that day) is illumined by another sun, which shines forth *the true light* (Jn 1.9). And once it has risen upon us, it will never set, but instead will flood all things with its own power of illumination, granting, to those who are worthy, eternal and unwavering light, and making them partakers of itself, and fashioning them into other suns" (ed. Meyendorff, 625-626).

Alteration, then, means a continuous assimilation, a continuous penetration by the energies of the Spirit, by His grace. And this experience terrifies me, because the Spirit and His activities, in all their vast infinity, threaten to devour my finite self, without however annihilating or altering my substance. The result is that I'm no longer me, but God. This is the great event that the Holy Spirit unceasingly works within us, when we put Him on like a garment, when we seek Him, when we ache for Him, when we love Him, when we don't grieve Him, as it says: *do not grieve the Holy Spirit* (Eph 4.30).

From this point on, I become truly charismatic, which means that I have acquired the gifts — the charisms — of the Holy Spirit.

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[9] The "spiritual hypostasis" is one's true identity, which was linked, in chap. 4, with providence and divine election, so that one's existence in time is already the realization of one's existence in eternity. This new mode of being is the convergence of the person and the particular *logos* of his existence, as articulated in the theology of St. Maximos the Confessor, see Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality*, 70-72, and the references cited on p. 390. As a new mode of existence, the "spiritual hypostasis" is similar to what Metropolitan John Zizioulas has described as the "hypostasis of ecclesial existence," in his essay, "Personhood and Being," in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1985), 53-54. There are also parallels with certain aspects of the thought of Arch. Sophrony, conveniently summarized by Nicholas Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I Am: The Theological Legacy of Archimandrite Sophrony* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2002), 79-84. See also below, chap. 7, n. 18.

At the same time, I myself become a gift, the result of Divine Grace. I become a prophet, because it is the Holy Spirit who *appoints prophets in the Church* (cf. 1 Cor 12.28). At the same time, I am the verification of the Spirit's prophecies. I am now whatever the Spirit is, because I have all of His gifts. To the extent that I am humble, I am rich. To the extent that I am empty, I am inebriated. With respect to my nature, I am poor, humble, and small, but I have nonetheless become a great, immortal king in virtue of my contact, my union, with the Holy Spirit.

We have, then, the *alteration of the reins* — of our innermost depths — which has been brought about by God. This *alteration* signifies, as we've said, both a death and a new birth: the death of what I was, and the birth of that which was created by the Holy Spirit. Here death and birth are closely associated, which is why baptism is always a birth, a rebirth, even for a seventy-year-old. But in essence it's a death, from which Christ Himself emerges. *In Christ you were baptized, in Christ you were put to death, in Christ you have risen* (cf. Rom 6.3-6). This is the *alteration* that takes place within us.

The *alteration of the reins*, then, is a mystical experience. It is not something we can comprehend or even anticipate, but rather something we suddenly behold. Just like when you look at yourself in the mirror and realize that you've aged, or that your skin's changed; or that you've grown and become stronger, not because you were aware of these changes when they were taking place, but because you see the results: your hair's gotten white, your complexion is different, your body has changed. So too do you see the inner changes brought about by the Holy Spirit.

This *joyfulness* that we feel *in our reins*, and consequently the experience of being filled with the newness of life in the Spirit; this renewal and completion of our life in the Holy Spirit, which makes us share in the *stature of Christ* (cf. Eph 4.13) — in the sense that Christ in His fullness enters into us and grows within us — this *alteration*, as I said, is the second mystical sign of the presence of the Spirit.

We live calmly, in tranquility, not being troubled by our thoughts. Suddenly, however, when we look to ourselves, we see the *joyfulness of our heart*, and sense the *alteration of our reins*, which is a mystical experience invisible to the eyes, but nevertheless real and true. These things are revealed to us during those moments when God speaks to us, when we are filled with humility, when we bow down before Him and weep. It is then that we see — by God's grace — the power that He's given us and the gifts that He's showered on us.

A third sign of the Spirit's presence is the way God *holds us by the hand*, as it says: *You have taken hold of my right hand; You have guided me by Your counsel, and You have taken me to Yourself with glory* (Ps 72.23).[10] What do we mean when we say that God *holds us by the hand*? This is now something of a different order, of a different level of intensity. It is more tangible, as when something inward suddenly comes into view, externalized to such an extent that it becomes visible. This is not the inner, mystical experience of the *alteration of the reins*, but rather something that, in a sense, controls you externally and governs your behavior. It is something that rises up and emerges.

When water boils, it eventually bubbles up under the lid and spills out over the sides of the pot. In the same way, when the Spirit can no longer endure His confinement within us, He bursts out. He radiates forth from a person's face, from his eyes, and you can tell what that person is like on the inside, what he has within him.

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[10] See above, chap. 1, n. 23.

That's how the Spirit bursts forth, and when He does, you feel as if God is *holding you by the hand.*

Another way of thinking about it is like this: You're alone, walking down a road, and you're full of joy, rejoicing. Why? Because you feel perfectly safe. But think how very different you would feel if the person you're going to see suddenly appears beside you and takes hold of your hand. From that point forward, the two of you proceed together, arm in arm, touching and being touched. That's what God does. He makes us feel like we're touching, like we're walking along together, side by side, and that He's *holding me by the hand.*

St. Symeon the New Theologian beautifully describes a similar experience with respect to his elder. He tells us how his elder took him to the mountains, to cool, refreshing springs, from which he made him drink. The two of them did all of this together.[11] This is exactly how you feel with God, as if the two of you were walking along, side by side. You're walking along, and all of a sudden you see Him springing forth, coming towards you, and taking both of your hands.

When this happens, we enter into a state of intimacy with God. When you and I, for instance, are on familiar terms, I might take hold of you and draw you closer to me. And that's a gesture you love, because it's a genuine expression of our intimacy and of the honor in which I hold you. That is how true friends take hold of each other. God does the same thing: He takes hold of both your hands, holds them in front of you, looks into your eyes, and you look at Him and wonder: "Is this really me? Is it really Him? Yes, it's Him! And this is me!"

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[11] St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Discourse* 36: "With much trouble he (i.e., Symeon's spiritual father) led me to the fountains and the wells, he drew me in my blindness after him by the hand of faith, which Thou gavest me, and compelled me to follow him. . . . Had he not held me by the hand and made me stand close to the fountain and guided the hands of my mind, I should not ever have been able to find where the water was welling forth" (deCatanzaro, 370-371).

This is an incredibly beautiful moment. As we said earlier, it belongs to another order of greatness: the greatness of friendship, of intimacy, of love. God no longer simply guides and directs you, but now He plays with you, and you play with Him: He kisses you and you kiss Him, He loves you and you love Him. Now He's in a jesting mood, and you play with Him like water plays with a ray of light, and together the two of you become one. As time plays with eternity, so too do you play with God.[12]

You see Him and He sees you. You look at Him, He looks at you. You are amazed before Him, at a total loss, and then, just when you're beginning to get used to Him, just when He no longer seems so remarkable — "Oh," you say, "it's just my friend again" — He suddenly seizes you and embraces you. And you feel Him taking hold of you, drawing you close, and holding you tight; you feel His breath, the beating of His heart, His pulse, the cracking of His bones. You know how your bones sometimes crack when someone suddenly hugs you? You feel something similar happening with God. And you say: "He's like me!" But, in fact, you've become like Him, your life has been taken up and united to His life. You've been assimilated to Him, not He to you.

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[12] See St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 31.32-33 (= Fifth Theological Oration), where he considers the image of a ray of light reflected in a pool of water and glimmering on the surface of a wall. For Gregory, the unity and diversity exhibited by the refracted, oscillating ray of light is a provisional, material image of the Holy Trinity (LNPNF 7:328).

And this embrace becomes a squeezing, a contraction, a mutual enfolding, to such an extent that, in the end, it's an assimilation, so that the two disappear and only one remains, the One whom you discover within yourself (cf. Gal 2.20). And you try to understand what it is: Is it the intellect? Is it the heart? Is it your body? Is it your soul? Is it heaven? Everything's intertwined! You can't make things out clearly. Why? Because you're plunged deep down into the midst of what you're experiencing, namely: God Himself.

When you're standing outside, at a distance, you can look at a building; or when you're standing at a window, you can look out. But when you're inside the very thing you're looking at, there's no view. You're immersed in it, and you can't see a thing! Immersed in the depths of God, there's no longer any vision, no perspective, no foreground or distance, nothing at all. There is only the desire for death. And even that becomes clear to us only after the fact, only after we've lost the beautiful experience of union with God, for it is then that we say: "If only I'd died then" (cf. Phil 1.21-23).

God *takes us by the hand* and begins to play with us, tenderly, with the greatest intimacy, as one might embrace and play with a small child. He picks you up in His love, and presses you closely to Himself. He hugs you, but then He releases you, and sets you back down. That's followed by another hug, and another release, all of which contributes to making you more mature, more humble. When He sets you down, you see your own nakedness, your poverty, and then you desire Him all the more ardently. It is then that you realize that there's nothing you want so much as to die and be with God (cf. Phil 1.21-23).

When you're locked in God's embrace, however, you do not experience this desire for death, because at that point you're united to Him, you're immersed within Him, and you're not able to understand anything. In such moments, mental activity ceases.[13] All that remains is the sense that God has taken possession of you. And something else: when someone has come to know the joyful play of God, and experienced the things we've spoken about, then he knows that his end cannot be other than an eternity spent like this, in an unending intimacy with God, in what we call "converse" with God. What do I mean by this?[14]

In order to answer this question, let's begin with the Word, since *in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God* (Jn 1.1). *The Word*, it says, *was with God*, with the preposition "with" having the sense of "being turned toward," or "with a view toward," in the sense of "facing" God the Father. In order to "converse," then, with God, we must communicate with and through His own, proper Word (cf. Jn 14.6). That *the Word was with God* means that all His "momentum" was toward the Father; the entire movement and flow of His life, we might say, was directed toward the Father. Thus in order for your life to be turned toward God, you must first commune with the Word, with Christ, so that, in the end, all things will be one with the Father. Everything began with Him, as from a single source and principle, and thus everything will return to Him (cf. Rm 11.36).[15] This is why it is impossible for the two of us to exist in separation. Instead, the two of us must become one, and that can only take place through Him, Who is *with* the Father. In the life of the divine and the divinized, there can only be a unity, not a duality.

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[13] On which, see above, chap. 1, n. 20.

[14] On the word "converse" (Greek: *homilia*); see Evagrios, *On Prayer* 3: "Prayer is the *converse* of the intellect with God" (compare *Philokalia*, 1:57: "Prayer is the *communion* [*homilia*] of the intellect with God," and Sinkewicz, 193: "Prayer is a *communion* [*homilia*] of the mind with God," who adds the following note from Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 7.7.39.6: "Prayer is *converse* [*homilia*] with God. So even if we speak to Him silently in a whisper without moving the lips, we cry out interiorly. For God listens unceasingly to all our interior converse." Sinkewicz notes that, whereas Clement uses the term *"homilia"* in a way that suggests an interior conversation with God, he believes that Evagrios moves beyond such a notion, in favor of something like a "communion of constant presence, free of words and forms"). See also St. Ilias the Presbyter, *Gnomic Anthology* 1.21: "The body cannot be purified without fasting and vigil, the soul without mercy and truth, and the intellect without contemplation and *converse* (*homilia*) with God" (*Philokalia*, 3:36, where *"homilia"* is translated as "communion").

Do you remember the beautiful words of the Psalmist? *Then You spoke in vision to Your sons, and You said: 'I have set help on a mighty one'* (Ps 88.20). This refers to a prophecy concerning David, and the glory he would acquire upon becoming king, that is, when he would become a type of Christ, because what was said of David had its ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

You spoke in vision. Let us look at this closely. When I *speak* to someone, it means that I have placed that person before me, face to face; I have made him my equal. And when I *speak to them in vision*, it means that I *see* them, in the sense that distance and differences have been removed, abolished. It's a perfect embrace of one with the other, perfect equality. *I have set help on a mighty one.* David was *mighty* because this was what God desired, and He made him such through the *help* which he *set on* him. What sort of *help* is in question here? If you look at the Hebrew, you'll see that this is actually a reference to royalty, to the royal mark of anointing which God placed on David's head, so that the text reads: "with my holy oil have I anointed my mighty one." Does this mean that the Septuagint translators didn't understand the meaning of the Hebrew? Didn't they know that this phrase prefigured the royal dignity of Christ, the Anointed One? Yet they ignored the basic sense and chose instead to give the passage a deeper meaning.

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[15] Cf. St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy* 1.1: "*Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights* (Jas 1.17). But there is something more: inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously towards us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in. For, as the sacred Word says: *from Him and to Him are all things* (Rom 11.36)" (Luibheid, 145).

I have set help: let us consider this verse carefully. The Psalmist said this to lay stress, not on the recipient of the help, not on the person upon whom it was acting, but on God, Who is its source. And God's help is precisely an outpouring, a kind of projection of Himself. Thus the psalmist wanted to show just what it was that had been poured forth and came to rest on David's head. He wanted to say that the *help, set upon the mighty one*, was God Himself; as if God were to say: "I made him mighty, because I, the Mighty One, settled upon him." The crown was the King Himself, the royal anointing was the Anointed One Himself, Christ Himself. As if He were saying: "It was I who entered into the life of David, so much so that he became a part of Me, he partook of My own help, of My own grace." Do you see, then, how prophetically, but also how mystically, how truly spiritually, the Septuagint renders the Hebrew text?

I have set help upon a mighty one. God is the source and giver of help, of which man is the receiver. Whatever distance existed between the two has been abolished. Now we have equality, followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, Who, like a royal crown, has come to rest on the head of man, just as we see Him resting in the saints, transforming them, sanctifying them, and divinizing them. This is the final event awaited by every soul that loves God: to be filled by the Holy Spirit. This is the *pouring out of the Spirit upon your sons and daughters,* of which the prophet speaks (Joel 2.28). They will not be intoxicated *with new wine* (cf. Acts 2.13), but rather with the Holy Spirit, Who comes and makes you other than what you were. Take a mere mortal, and set a royal crown upon his head, and you have a king. But when the *crown of glory is the Lord Himself* (cf. Is 28.5), mortal man becomes a god. It is, as we've said, "converse" with God, union with God.

This union, apparent in daily life, is most evident in the person himself, who unceasingly matures, because God unceasingly *empties Himself* (Phil 2.7), that is, gives Himself to, and thus acts upon the person until the moment of their ultimate encounter. Even then, however, that person's life continues to unfold, as do the changes that God brings about within him. This is why death itself is not the end, not the final stage, but simply a point of transition. Man's resurrection, his regeneration and renewal, will continue in the next life, because the same man and the same God will continue to encounter each other, even though the two will be irrevocably united.

"Converse" with God, then, is union with God. You feel it within you; you feel it around you, as well. You're now somebody who no longer lives for himself, who is no longer the slave of his negative thoughts, no longer a prisoner of his self-will and selfish desires. How could it be otherwise, when the infinite is so vitally present to you? *On that day, all of their thoughts shall perish* (Ps 145.4), and God will become something so vast that He overwhelms you. And He keeps coming toward you, closer and closer, until you can't see anything, because He has completely overwhelmed you.

Imagine that you're walking along, and, all of a sudden, you come upon a sleeping lion. Whatever else may have been in your field of vision, whatever else you may have been preoccupied with or thinking about, you'd forget all about it, because there's a lion in front of you. And what if it woke up? Then you'd have absolutely no thought for anything else whatsoever, no matter what it was. You'd be terrified. Now suppose you saw it get up and come towards you, coming so close to you that it blocked out the horizon. Suppose it came so close to you that it pressed its face against you, and you could see the fire in its eyes? And suppose it opened its mouth, and swallowed you whole, so that you had entered into its being? Fine chance you'd have then of remembering anything, or of being distracted from the moment! That's what it's like with God.[16]

In your "converse" with God, in your union with God, you are filled, as it were, with the fear of the lion asleep before you. After that, it's the fear of the waking lion. The closer you get to God, the greater the fear that grips you. As God comes closer to you, your fear becomes so great that you are completely beside yourself, entering into a state of indescribable ecstasy, at which point you don't know if you're alive or dead. And then you die, and He exists.

This is the reason why God became man. This is the reason for which He brought us into being, and this is what He promises to each of us: union with Himself. Is it possible for God's promises to be lies? Is it possible for Him not to be faithful? (cf. Heb 10.23). No. It is not possible.

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[16] For the Biblical typology of Christ as the *sleeping Lion of Judah*, compare Gen 49.9 and Rev 5.5. According to tradition, the lion was believed to sleep in its lair with its eyes open, and thus was a type of Christ who "did not close the eye of His divinity as he slept in His tomb," according to Leontios of Constantinople (P. Allen and C. Datema, *Leontius Presbyter of Constantinople* [Brisbane, 1991], 112, n. 59). On Holy Saturday morning, we sing: "Come and let us look today on the Son of Judah as He sleeps. And with the prophet let us cry aloud to Him: *Thou hast crouched down, Thou hast slept as a lion; who shall awaken Thee, O King?*" (*Lenten Triodion*, 652).

When you understand, to the extent that this is possible, everything that God has done for us, then you'll say: *all my bones shall say: Who is like You, Lord?* (Ps 34.10). Why *all my bones*? Scripture uses the image of bones when it wants to depict a powerful sensation. Thus when we sin it says that our bones are *shattered* (cf. Ps 41.11, 101.4; Is 38.13), or that they *rejoice* when we draw near to God (cf. Ps 50.8). *All my bones*, then, signifies everything that is solid, strong, and permanent; not the transient flesh, *which fades like a flower* (Ps 102.15), or a *fleeting shadow* (cf. Jb 8.9; Ps 101.11), but the bones, which define our constitution as physical beings. If you break your legs, you'll collapse and fall to the ground in a heap. But when they're intact, you're whole and can walk.

Thus *all my bones* means: I'm whole, complete, in the best of health. I'm whole and I feel it, and thus I say: *All my bones shall say: Who is like You, Lord?* (Ps 34.10). It is as if David were asking: Who could do these things except God? It is the Lord Who acts, it is the Lord Who approaches. He is both the creative cause of all things and their glorious end. And just as you, in your wholeness, in the presence of the whole God, can say *all my bones*, so too can you see Him *glorified among His saints* (Ex 15.11).

Glorified among His saints means that God is glorified in the assembly (*synaxis*) of the saints, in the place where they are gathered together. And if God is glorified in and through their assembly, then that assembly is the revelation of the glory of God. That God is *glorified among His saints*, means that, as long as I experience *joyfulness of heart*; as long as I'm assembled together with all the others; as long as I stand before the holy altar; as long as we gather together here day and night, as members of this community, then, all of us together, in our *joyfulness* before the Lord, constitute and manifest the glory of God.

The words *glorified among His saints* mean that it is the saints who glorify God. The Holy One is glorified by his holy ones, because it is He who has brought them to the perfection of holiness, to a quality or condition, in other words, that is exclusive to Himself. And this holy assembly, the Church, which is the means by which we too become saints, is in fact nothing other than the revelation of God glorified. It is the gathering together of Israel, and there, too, is Christ the king, as we said before.

The *heart*, then, *rejoicing* in the midst of the assembly, discovers that God is glorified. Not that He is *being* glorified or *about to be* glorified, but *glorified* and actively accomplishing mighty works. What a wonderful thing, that human beings should become the instruments whereby God can be glorified and revealed! And He is *glorified*, and *marvelous in glories* (Ex 15.11). Why in *glories*? Because this is another way of describing all the things we've spoken about: glory is the vision of God. Glory is the vision of light. Glory is what I see before me. And so *marvelous in glories* means that the *marvelous* quality of God is made known through these glories of ours; it is made known through these revelations, in the midst of our joy and our communion with God. Truly God is *marvelous in glories*!

What else can we desire, if not to glorify God and exalt Him? Why else are we alive, if not for God to become *marvelous* through us? And God is *marvelous in glories*, which means something absolute and exclusive: me and God. Without that, anything at all might exist, but not the marvel of God's glory.

When you say "My God, my God," it means that, in a certain sense, you can *see* God, because otherwise everything inside you is pitch black. It's like saying: "There He is! That's God!" And that's precisely why God is *marvelous*, and why Scripture goes on to say that He *works wonders* (Ex 15.11). What are these *wonders*? Everything we've been talking about; everything that happens when He appears in glory to us. The wind blows: it troubles the face of the sea and churns up its depths. But then another wind blows: the Breath of the Spirit, and the sea becomes calm again, smooth as glass. *The sea rages* (cf. 4 Mac 7.5), but God rebukes it, divides it, and it becomes *dry land* (cf. Gen 1.9; Ex 14.21). But that was only the beginning of God's wonders.

And what wonders! Our sanctity, our peace, our happiness, our blessedness, our ascetic struggle, our prayer: all of these things are gifts of the Holy Spirit. So too our humility, our love, our gentleness, and our inner silence — which enables us to hear the voice of God — all of these things are signs of God's presence among us.

God *works wonders*. When I am sanctified in the assembly of the Church, when my life is a vision of the altar of God, when I see God revealed *in glories*, when I cannot live without these *glories*, when our life together becomes a life of *marvelous wonders*, a life that bears witness to the grace of God; when our sanctity, our virtue, and the *fragrance of our lives* (2 Cor 2.15) is such that others are taken by surprise and wonder how it has come about, then the eternal God is present in time, and we are present in Him.

Our life has meaning only when we live in the Spirit. And we live in the Spirit when we see the things we have spoken about today: *joyfulness of heart, alteration of the reins*, and the *taking hold of the right hand*. After that followed converse with God, and intimate, unending union with Him. Such a life is so beautiful, and indeed the only life worth living.

And this is why we said that if anything justifies our presence in the monastery, it is life in the Spirit. If anything justifies our existence as monks, and makes our enclosure in the monastery an opening to the heavens, it is life in the Spirit. If there's anything worth living and dying for, it is this alone. If there's any reason why Christ was born, crucified, and resurrected, it is this: so that we may became what He is.[17]

I'd like to finish by saying a few words about the prophecy of Nathan, who told David that he would become a great king, and that his seed would be an eternal seed, because it would bear Christ Himself. After the prophecy was uttered, it says that *King David came and sat before the Lord* (1 Chron 17.16). He didn't "go" anywhere. Instead, he *came before the Lord.*

The only clear perspective we can have on things is determined by our relation to the Lord. The only way to know where a person is in his life — if he is coming, or going, or getting lost — is by reference to the Lord and His judgments. It is only the *mind of the Lord* (Is 40.13), the vantage point from which He sees things, that enables us to see and understand what somebody else is doing. No human criterion, no earthly calculation, no system or theory, no opinion, power, or desire can vindicate a person: for that you need the perspective provided by God. It is from there that we can see how it is with others. And how is it for me, when looked at from where the Lord is sitting? Am I heading in the right direction, or moving away from it?

David came and sat before the Lord. Doubtless what is meant here is that David sat opposite the tabernacle in which the Lord revealed Himself. He sat opposite the altar, just as we do, every day. David sat before the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, *before the Lord.* How he believed! How he saw Him! And day and night we too sit before the same tent, before the same Lord. But can we also say that we've come to the Lord in order to *sit before Him* like David? Do we place ourselves in the presence of God? Is our sitting a drawing near and a touching of the Lord? I don't know.

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[17] See St. Athanasios, *On the Incarnation* 54.3: "He became like we are, so that we might become like He is" (SC 199:458).

In the language of the Bible, "sitting" represents permanency, stability, security, and certainty. It means that the two of us are here together, able to discuss things. *Come, let us reason together* (Is 1.18), says the Lord. Here, however, it is David who calls upon God, and God comes. It's as though David were saying to God: "Come and sit here and we'll talk about things." When you believe, when you behold God, when you're certain that He plays with you, asks for you, and is revealed in and through you, why shouldn't you speak to Him? Why would the Word even exist, if not to speak, if not to be heard?

And King David came in, and sat before the Lord, and said, Who am I, O Lord, my Lord, and what is my house, that You have loved me for eternity? (2 Kg 7.18). Who am I? And You: Who are You? You're God. But I'm the dust of the earth. Who am I that You've *loved me for eternity* and all my posterity? Who am I? What am I? I'm nothing. And the knowledge of my nothingness fills me with dread. Nevertheless, I've sat down to speak to You, because You've given me the right to do so. You called me. You prophesied to me. You revealed Your Self to me, and You have established me as king of Israel. You have given me more than I could have ever imagined, and yet for You it's the least possible of things. You've given me eternity, You've placed this crown on my head, You have given Your Self to me, and have made me God! *And yet all these things were little in Your sight, O God* (1 Chron 17.17).

What shall David do to glorify You? (1 Chron 17.18). What can I, David, say to God in order to praise Him, to express my thanks? Not the David whom You glorified, or made king, or anointed, because all that is the result of Your grace. I mean David in himself, in his own being, who is dust and ashes, a nonentity: what can *he* do to glorify You? Absolutely nothing! Woe to me, O Lord, if You were to look upon me as I am. Fortunately, You see me as You've made me, in accordance with Your heart, as You wanted me to be, and as You've always meant me to be from the beginning of time.

That, more or less, is the life of the monk. Our participation in the services of the Church, the time spent praying in our cells, our prostrations, are all together something like the experience of David. The life of the monk is a perpetual turning to God, an invitation to God: Come and sit down, because I have come here for You, and You alone. I look only to You. I address myself only to You. Who am I? Who is this sinner, this guilty, ungrateful person, who crucified You and deserves ten thousand deaths? And Who are You, Who have placed Yourself upon my head like a crown, and given me Your Self? What can I do, O Lord, to glorify You? Nothing. All I can do is confess Your grace.

If David had not understood the prophecy; if he had not understood why God had called him; if he did not understand the purpose for which God created him, he would not have spoken those majestic words, neither would he have been humbled in the way that he was, nor would he have been able to say to God: "Let's sit down in this place, You and me together, facing each other."

* * *

My beloved children, let us immerse ourselves deeply in God, like divers descend into the sea. Let us understand the mystery that has entered our life, and for which "all things visible and invisible were created." When we have done so, let us come before God like David. Let us pray for one another, and also for our selves, because God *came to save that which was lost* (Mt 18.11; Lk 15.6). He came to save everyone who realizes that he is lost; everybody, that is, who says to God: "You know who I am, and I do too: I'm nothing." God will save the man who recognizes his own nothingness, who understands the work of God, and the lightning speed with which God accomplishes His marvels and wonders. But if we have not recognized this, if we have not understood this, what have we accomplished?

But do not despair. Instead, like David, descend into your heart and sit before the face of the Lord. And if we have not done this every day, let us at least do so *for as long as it is called 'today'* (Heb 3.13). Then we can say to Him: "You are my God!" And may this God be He Who *holds us by both hands.* Then we can say that He is *my Lord and my God* (Jn 20.28). Then we can say that we've become monks. Then, the glory that shone upon the robes of David will also shine upon our robes, which are themselves a sign of the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The feasts continue. We are living in the light of Christ's resurrection. Soon it will be Pentecost. When that day comes, and we're singing those beautiful hymns, and kneeling before His Spirit, I'd like us to experience that moment as much as we can. As we kneel during those three, long prayers, may our kneeling not be merely a moment of discomfort, a moment of time empty for not having tasted the *fruit of the Spirit* (cf. Gal 5.22), but rather a cry: "Come Holy Spirit. Come and dwell in me."

And when we say: "Come, Holy Spirit; come and dwell in us," let us know what the Holy Spirit is, having already come to know

Him, having already listened to Him, having already seen Him, having been cultivated by Him, kneaded by Him, shaped by Him, and conquered by Him.

And if we will not have done something like this, tell me, then, what have we done? What have we accomplished? What will we have done so that God can say to us with joy: "This is why I brought you into the world; this is why I knew you before all time; this is why I baptized you, called you, and glorified you" (cf. Rom 8.29-30).

When I'm alone at night, this is what I wish for: both for me and for you, because a father can never feel cut off from his children. When I see you, that's what I feel; that's what I think. When I speak well of you, when I reproach you, when I have you before my eyes, when you are absent, when I have you in front of me during prayer, when I commemorate your names in the Holy Chalice, when I pour out my heart to God, that alone is how I see you.

Any other thought, any other way of seeing things, would be tremendously discouraging. But I've never been discouraged, because I've never believed that those whom God has given me have any wish to live without the Holy Spirit.

6. AWAITING PENTECOST*

In the first book, O Theophilos, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom He had chosen. To them He presented Himself alive after His passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God (Acts 1.1-4)

If there's anything that gives meaning to our life here in the monastery, and if there's anything that imparts a spiritual dimension to our time, it's the fact that what we're doing here is apostolic and makes us apostles as well. This is why it's natural for us to contemplate the lives and activities of the Holy Apostles, to see ourselves from their perspective, and to judge our lives in light of theirs.

Thus I thought we might take a look at the Book of Acts, especially those passages where we see the Apostles experiencing something similar to what we're going through now. It was a time of sorrow that was afterwards transformed into joy. It was a time of expectation, and also of trial and temptation, but which finally proved to be foundational for the entire apostolic community. What time was this? When the risen Christ had ascended into the heavens, and His disciples were awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit, just as we are now.

The story begins in the first chapter, with Christ in the company of His apostles *whom He had chosen. To them He presented Himself alive after His passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking of the kingdom of God* (Acts 1.3).

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* Delivered at the Sacred Monastery of Simonos Petras, 26 April, 1977.

Every word used by Luke the Evangelist, both here and in his Gospel, is carefully chosen and rich in meaning. Indeed these are words that the Spirit of God spoke within him, and thus they directly echo divine truth and reality.

What, then, does he say? That Christ was with His *apostles whom He had chosen* (Acts 1.2). Clearly He had *chosen* them — or "elected" them, which is the primary sense of the word used here (*eklegein*) — because nothing happens apart from divine election. No one can become an apostle, or a member of the apostolic community, apart from divine election, which is a special act of divine favor and foreknowledge, along with the preparation that is a part of such foreknowledge.

When did this take place? *After the passion.* That is to say, after the great sorrow that befell the disciples, when they thought that all was lost, when it seemed that all their expectations had come to nothing, when they thought that there was no longer any reason for hope. Why? Because it seemed that Christ, their only hope, had been handed over to eternal death, and was entombed in a fearsome grave. But it was precisely then, *after the passion,* that *He presented Himself alive.*

If you look at this verse closely, you'll see that Luke does not simply say that Christ presented Himself "alive," as if to say that He was merely "seen to have been alive," or "appeared to be alive," like everyone else. The sense is rather that He presented Himself "living." Of course Christ is alive, and "there was never a time when He was not alive."[1] But here Christ's assumption of life, His *taking up* of life, is an absolutely voluntary act, *for no one takes My life*

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[1] St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 29.1 (= Third Theological Oration) (LNPNF 7:301).

from Me, He says, *but I lay it down of My own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again; this charge I received from My Father* (Jn 10.18).

After the passion, He presented Himself living. The life of Christ is the life given to Him by the Father *after the passion.* After the resurrection, therefore, the life in Christ that the apostles experienced was not simply the same life they had come to know during the days of His earthly ministry. Neither was the resurrected body of Christ simply the same body they had known, and which His enemies had slain and buried. It was a resurrected body, *raised in glory, raised in power* (cf. 1 Cor 15.42-45). The body that Christ assumed in His love for mankind had formerly been subject to the laws of corruption, to the laws of nature. But now those laws are of no consequence for Him. That was how He was able to enter into the upper room *while the doors were closed* (Jn 20.19, 26).[2] That was a sovereign act that Christ accomplished as God. And it is the same sovereign activity by which Christ, *after the passion, presents Himself as living,* as true and eternal life itself (cf. Jn 11.25).

Whoever is able to accept suffering, whoever is able to die the death granted to Him by the Father, is able to participate in the true, eternal life of Christ. If he cannot, or will not do this, then his life is a living death, *for whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it* (Lk 17.33).

After the passion, He presented Himself living. Why does Luke say that He "presented" Himself, and not simply that "he appeared" or "was seen"? Because it is not possible for Christ to be revealed in any other way than by actively *presenting Himself.* This was not a chance encounter, but an absolute, voluntary act of the divine will; it was something that Christ wanted to do, chose to do, consciously and deliberately.

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[2] See above, chap. 1, pp. 21-22.

Just as Christ *laid down His life of His own accord* (Jn 10.18), and was likewise buried and resurrected *of His own accord*, so now He *presents Himself living*, freely, voluntarily, *of his own accord*. He shows that everything begins and ends with Him. All things are at his disposal, all are subject to the power of His will. Whatever He wishes, He does; wherever He wants, He goes; and whatever He wants to give or reveal, *He presents.*

After the passion, Christ no longer had an ordinary, human body. He was *no longer* flesh in the way we understand it, and thus *we no longer know Him according to the flesh* (2 Cor 5.16). But the disciples saw flesh, and even though the risen Christ had no need to eat, He nevertheless *took some fish and ate it* (Lk 24.42), because that's what the disciples could understand. He did it voluntarily, for their sake. How, then, was He able to eat it? Where did He put it? A thousand questions could be posed. But the only answer is that He wanted it so, and so He did it. Do you see? Christ is what *He presents Himself* to us, and that includes *when* and *how* and the *extent to which* He does so. He is what He offers to us; He is "offered and partaken of,"[3] but only insofar as He wishes. He gives what He wishes. And what He gives is what we can receive, what we're capable of understanding, and in accordance with the degree of our love.[4]

And this is why He did not respond to St. Mary Magdalene's request, because she didn't know what she was asking for; she didn't know who was standing before her. Neither did He respond directly to the questions and concerns of His apostles, but rather created for them the conditions necessary for a proper understanding of the true God. Now, however, *after the passion,* He intervenes directly in their lives, *and presents Himself living,* thereby providing them with proof that He had risen from the dead. As we said: He reigns, governs, rules, and does whatever He wishes.

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[3] From the prayer of the Cherubic Hymn, *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.*

[4] See above, chap. 5, pp. 129-131.

It follows, then, that for us to be able to receive, contain, and understand God, this will have to be something that God Himself wants. Thus we'll have to move Him, stir Him, and oblige Him to *present Himself* to us. Of course, no matter what we do, no matter how much we exert ourselves, no matter how much we tire ourselves out, however much we pray, however much we weep, there's absolutely nothing that we ourselves can achieve, *because it depends not on man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy* (Rom 9.16). All we can achieve is what God wants to give us. If He so desires, He'll drip like a tap, and we'll get a few drops of water. And if He wishes, He'll become a *mighty river* (cf. Ps 64.9), the source of *life-giving waters* (Jn 7.38), and we'll be overwhelmed with healing.

When He does *present Himself to us living,* we'll be able to receive Him only by ceaselessly yielding and surrendering to Him; only by our utter self-denial and voluntary death (cf. Mt 16.24). The more we await His arrival by means of such a death, the more He desires to enter our lives.

He presented Himself living. He presented His true self, the Son and Word of God, *living*! That's a tremendous thing! It removes all doubts, eliminates any hesitation, and does away with the slightest suspicion. Whether we believe or not, we belong to God. Whether we understand it or not, or feel His presence or not, or rejoice in that presence or not, He exists. He is my God. He is my Lord. Even during moments of darkness and terror, when God doesn't exist for me, He still exists. When I feel I'm a failure, when all my efforts seem fruitless, when my life seems to have passed in vain, Christ is still my Christ. He is there for me no matter what happens. He exists irrespectively of my capabilities, capacities, and comprehension. I might imagine that God is small. But God is great. I might think that God doesn't hear. But He does. And He has given Himself entirely to me, so that there's only one possibility of failure: for me to break off my relationship with the *One Who exists* (Ex 3.14).

He presented Himself living. It's extremely important that I know this truth, and thus be able to feel — literally, palpably — the mystery of the enormous love whereby God overlooks my utter nothingness; a love that renders Him immune, as it were, to my own will or actions. God remains the God of love, the God of majesty, the God of glory, the God of strength, the God Who achieves anything He wants to. And as He was to all the apostles, the prophets, and the saints, so He is to me, however small, sinful, destitute, and worthless I may be.

He presented Himself living. Not simply "alive," but *living.* Not simply active but Acting. This was God moving about among them, *before their very eyes* (Acts 1.9). Why? To bear witness to them that the Father's promise was now fulfilled, namely, that they would receive the whole of God in Christ, Who would *remain in them and they in Him* (Jn 6.56, 15.4-7; 1 Jn 3.24).

Thus *after the passion*, the time had come for the apostles to take possession of God. Until then, Christ existed, but He was unassailable, beyond their reach. Now, however, He comes as One Who offers Himself, Who may be taken, received. Now the barrier, the *dividing-wall of hostility* (Eph 2.14), has been torn down; now chaos has been wiped away. Now Christ is here as One Who is familiar, intimate, so that you can make Him your own any time you like. God, the Holy One, is now *your* God, *your* Lord, your friend and your Father.

Until this moment, He was the terrible God of the Old Testament: the *God of powers* (Is 42.13), the *God of heaven* (Ps 90.1; Dan 4.31-32), of *darkness* (Ps 17.11), and the *earth* (Ps 46.7). He wasn't yet the God you could hold in your hand and do whatever you wanted with. He was God the unattainable, the *inaccessible* (cf. 1 Tim 6.16). Now, however, He is the God Who is *living* for them, moving toward them; *living* for them precisely so that they can live for Him. God moves toward them so that they might respond with a reciprocal movement, and thus win for themselves the whole God.

He presented Himself to them living. With these words, Luke is telling us that *the fullness of time has come* (Gal 4.4), that God's promises have been fulfilled. Christ had to suffer, rise from the dead, ascend into the heavens, and resume His place at the right hand of the Father, in order to ensure the promise of their salvation; so that their deepest desires would not remain unfulfilled.

Thus Christ *presented Himself living* in order to show his disciples that, if there was any point to their existence, it was precisely the vision of God: in *seeing* the living Christ. True communication with God is not simply thinking about God; neither is it a loving disposition toward Him. Instead, it is perfect knowledge of Him, a "grasping" of God in the sense of taking possession of Him, making Him your own, having an experience of God as *living.* And that God is *living* means that I stand in relation to Him as to life itself, a relationship in which the two of us — two lives, two activities, two persons — live and move together, in a process of mutual giving and receiving.

By saying that *He presented Himself living*, Luke is telling us that the aim of life is the vision of God: to see and enjoy the living God. Thus if I am unable to see God, or lay hold of Him, or win Him over; if I am unable to love God truly, with a love that is a true, dynamic embrace, then God for me is not a living God: He is a dead God. And Luke's words are consequently a testimony to the resurrection. In Christ, God became man, suffered, was buried, and rose from the grave — without ever ceasing to be the Son and Word of God — so that man might share in His divinity and thereby partake fully of true life.

Saint Augustine reflected profoundly on the grace and love of God, so much so that he did not dare to gaze directly on the face of Christ, or subject Him to a form of theological interrogation, but rather humbled himself, kneeling before Him, and bowing his head as a wretch, a sinner, a man who had sullied the body given him by God. And to the extent that he bowed down, God raised him up; to the extent that he humbled himself, God glorified him (cf. Mt 23.12), filling him with grace, giving him, in effect, the right to gaze upon Him face to face, to live in the One Who lives (cf. Ex 3.14).

After his conversion, which was an ongoing process, the saint began to see the riches of the grace he received. He saw himself elevated to the heights, living in Christ Jesus, a member of the Church, God reigning within him. And all of this was due to God's grace, because God had deemed him worthy to live for Him, and thus to say these sublime words: "I love only when I live, and I live only when I love. And I do not live for anything other than Him. I breathe for Him, move for Him, exist for Him. Everything that exists, and I first, exists for Him."[5]

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke presents Christ not simply as an agent bestowing grace, but as the living, active, personal God.

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[5] See St. Augustine, *Confessions* 10, and above, chap. 1, n. 6.

He presented Himself living, because only the living can act. Thus the Evangelist is depicting the personality of Christ in light of His human nature, which He assumed, and by means of which He lives and acts within man. His life is the source of mine.

Just as the moon receives and reflects the light of the sun, so I, too, who am a dark moon, a dead thing, receive and reflect the living Christ, to the extent that I have clothed myself in His light. This is a reflection of our personal, ontological relationship with Christ, our incorporation into His body. If Christ is risen from the dead, and if we live, then we live solely in order to unite our sinful, fallen nature with Him. To the extent that we do so, we become a revelation of God the Word.

When the Son of God took flesh and became the son of the Virgin, our human nature, our flesh, became the vehicle for divine revelation. And thus I too can be deemed worthy to reveal the Son and Word of God. Ultimately, my life exists only in His, so that, at some point, at some later spiritual stage, I might come to experience, know, and enjoy the Third Person of the Trinity, as He lives and is revealed within the Church.

This is the mystery of the Father Who lives in the Son (cf. Jn 14.10-11). Of His own volition, the Father *sends forth His Son, born of woman* (Gal 4.4), which means that the Son of God was woven into the fabric of human nature. As a result, the Son and Word of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, becomes a definitive participant in the life of mankind. And He is now so closely interwoven with us, so deeply connected to us, that we can say that, like the soul and the body, there would be no Holy Spirit apart from the human beings in which He dwells (cf. Jn 14.16-17).

This, then, is the foundation for the mystery of genuine "spirituality," which is nothing other than the preparation for the advent of the Holy Spirit, Who in Christ comes and fills all things.

He presented Himself living, then, in order to reveal to me my true life, and so that I may know that I am only alive when I am united with the living God. I live only when the purpose and the aim of my life is the living Christ. Anything else, no matter what it is, pales in significance. Anything else is secondary, nonessential, and cannot be my aim. My sole aim is to live with the living Christ, to see Him, lay hold of Him, and serve Him.

There was another reason why *He presented Himself living*: because He knew that man is caught up in a struggle between darkness and light, between corruption and incorruption, between death and life, and thus between hell and God. In such a predicament, man falls and rises and falls again. And this is why, even though Christ *presented Himself living*, He also established within the Church the mystery of repentance and the sacrament of confession, so that man can constantly enjoy the right to assume, as we've said, to make his own, the life of God. Because, at the end of the day, man remains a sinner, and is sanctified only by receiving Christ, *because in Christ is life, and that life is the light of men* (Jn 1.4). When man rejects this life, he grows dark, just as the face of the moon when it turns away from the sun.

And like the moon with respect to the sun, man is a small thing, so cold, and so dark; hardened in the face of his own salvation, hardened before the luminous face of God. Little man loves himself so much! He's in love with his own nothingness, with his life of dust! He is mad with the fires of his own hell, with the slow, cruel death offered to him by the Evil One, and thus he is incapable of living in the light of the Triune Radiance, in the single light of the Three Suns of the Holy Trinity. Instead, he remains in his own death, in his own corrupted and fallen nature.

This is why man sees God *as if through a glass darkly* (1 Cor 13.12). This is why he sees Him by means of his desire. This is why he remembers Him only when He is absent. In his current state of blindness, man clings to various visions of the future. In his doubt and disbelief, he believes in the promise of tomorrow, when he hopes to attain all that he longs for. And thus we see in man the fate of Tantalus, longing for a future that never comes; or the ordeal of Prometheus, chained to the earth and writhing in agony.[6] Apart from God, man is dead, blind, without breath, without life. He can only grope for God in the darkness. And because God knows this, *He presents Himself living* to the apostles, so that they can bear witness that God has risen from the dead and lives.

And when I receive Christ, when I see Him, I feast my eyes on the living God and rejoice in Him. Even in my state of spiritual decay, even in my sin, in the abyss into which I've fallen, in the dark cloud that overshadows me, in my eternal midnight, I can still remember that the apostles have assured me that they saw the living Christ. Thus Christ lives, He Who is my life lives, and, at any moment, with one "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," that life can become mine, and, dead as I was, I can be filled to bursting with life.

He presented Himself living so that He might become the eternal and ineradicable faith of mankind; so that *blessed* might be those

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[6] These are two figures from ancient Greek mythology. Tantalus was a son of Zeus, who served the gods a meal consisting of the flesh of his own son, for which he was consigned to Hades, there to suffer eternal hunger and thirst. Prometheus was a Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, for which he was chained to a rock on the summit of a mountain, where his flesh was perpetually fed upon by an eagle.

who have not seen and have believed, and who continue to believe (cf. Jn 20.29; 1 Pt 1.8). And they are blessed because the certitude of their life is Christ. And as for you who don't see, who are fallen and blind, you too are blessed, for at your side stands the living God.

He presented Himself living by many proofs (Acts 1.3). What does "by many proofs" mean? In the first place, it's a historical fact, with many facets. After His resurrection from the dead, Christ appeared to the apostles many times and in different ways: He appeared to some individually, to others in groups of twos and threes, and even to large gatherings of a hundred and twenty or so. One saw Him in a garden, others while walking along the road. Some He invited to take hold of Him, others were told to refrain from holding Him. He ate with them, He gave them food. They saw Him on the sea, the saw Him on the land. They saw Him in the boat and standing on the shore. In all sorts of ways: *by many proofs.* And all of these ways testified to one thing: that Christ is alive. As we said a moment ago, there was no reason for Christ to eat fish. But by doing so, He testified that He was alive, and this is what we require: knowledge of the life of Christ, of Christ's "aliveness" based on personal experience.

And this is why He provided them with *many proofs,* which increased, we are told, *during the forty days when He appeared to them and spoke of the kingdom of God* (Acts 1.3). He gave the apostles such proofs, and so many of them, that they would be absolutely certain, even in the darkest moments of their lives, that Christ is alive, that He is the living God. And as for me, even if, because of my earthly nature and my sinfulness, I am still without a single "proof" of my own, Christ is still alive. My Christ, my life, is a living life.

In these short, simple verses, the Evangelist places us right in the midst of all that God has done and given to us. And what has He not done? If I may put in human terms, it was as if only one problem exercised the mind of God: how to make us understand, believe, and remember that He is living, that He lives for us, on our behalf. Before *the foundation of the world*, He arranges all His plans (cf. Eph 1.3-6), and establishes everything in a certain way, so that He, the infinite God, can enter into the limits of our finite human nature.

And thus we see God bending down, taking *the dust of the earth* (Gen 2.7), in order to fashion Adam in such a way that, the moment his eyes opened, he would see God. And when that first man, who was the whole of human nature, opened his eyes, what did he see? He saw God, his maker, Who had *breathed upon his face the breath of life* (Gen 2.7); Who had breathed into his nostrils, into the shell of his earthly body, into his dead and sleeping soul, and had given him life.

Adam's experience was not very different from that of a sleeping child, who wakes up and sees its father holding it, or kissing it affectionately, with tenderness, and feels this paternal affection. That's how it was with Adam. When he opened his eyes, he saw and knew nothing else but God and His tender embrace. And even though God placed him in a marvelous garden, filled with plants and trees, and canopied by stars and angels, Adam was made to see nothing but his maker, holding him in His hands, breathing into his nostrils. Christ was so close!

Do you see now what God did in order to make Himself comprehensible and accessible to man?

In paradise, God hears the footsteps of man. And man, too, even late *in the afternoon* (Gen 3.9), at the moment of his sin, hears the footsteps of God, the sound of which reminds him that, *on the* *day he ate of the tree, he died* (Gen 2.17). It's as if God said to him: "Do you hear Me walking? I'm living. And you? You're dead: you died the moment you *ate of the tree*, because it was then that you cut yourself off from Me. And thus I am alive, walking about, but you are without life, even if you live for a thousand years." What is the meaning of God "walking" about and "speaking" to Adam? These are the signs of God's love and mercy, which endure even in the face of human sin. How? Because this "sound," this *hearing of the voice of the Lord*, and this "movement," the *walking of the Lord in the garden* (Gen 3.9), testify that God gives Himself over to human apprehension, to human consciousness; that God is living and may be partaken of by human nature.

Despite the spiritual death of the first man, the living God continues to stand at his side. Even though Adam has fallen into hell, God is ready to raise him up. Indeed, the promise of future blessings is inherent in the very curses that God pronounces (Gen 3.15).[7] God seeks out a thousand ways to manifest His life to man, to reveal how close He is — so close that we can hear His voice, feel His breath upon us.

One example of God's stooping down to our level is given to us in the Psalms. Do you remember the wonderful image of Christ stooping down, in order to drink from a running stream? *He shall drink of the brook in the way*, it says, *therefore shall He lift up His head* (Ps 109.7). What does this mean? That "although you forget me, I, the heavenly God, stoop down just as you do. I share in your life, so that you can share in Mine. I move and act like you do, to show you that I've become like you, so that you can become like Me. Do you grow *weary on your journey*? So do I (cf. Jn 4.6). Do you thirst? So do I (cf. Jn 4.7, 19.28). Do you stoop down to drink water? I do the same: I humble Myself, I empty myself (Phil 2.7). I drink and refresh Myself. What more can I do? What do you do that I don't? And since I'm so close to you, stooping down along side of you, can't you catch hold of Me? Can't you seize Me, make Me yours eternally? Can't you look at My face? We're both stooping down over the same brook, the same water; we've both become poor and thirsty. I, Who am rich, Who lack nothing, Who am tireless, Who can encompass the universe in a single stride, have contracted myself into this tiny point in space, solely in order to be

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[7] In Gen 3.15, God curses the serpent and says: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he* (i.e., her seed) *shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* The "seed of the woman" is Christ, who came into the world to "bruise the serpent's head," that is, to crush the power of death and the devil, but only at the cost of His own voluntary suffering and death (thus: "you [i.e., the serpent] shall bruise *His* heel"), so that Christ trampled down death by means of His own death. The Fathers of the Church consider Gen 3.15 to be both a prophecy and the first proclamation of the Gospel message of salvation in Christ.

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8. The Elder discusses Ps 109 in chap. 3 of *Let us Rejoice in the Lord*, 60-75. In his comments on verse 7, he notes the following: "What is the *brook*? It is a thing subject to change; something with a beginning and an end, something which moves, flows, passes by, rushes on, and changes. Today the bed of the brook is dry as dust. Tomorrow it is surging with water, overflowing its bounds, and later, once again, its strength is diminished, and its flood abates. As such, the *brook* is a type and image of all created nature, but especially of mortal human nature, which has a beginning and an end. God draws near to the brook which now floods and now runs dry. He stoops down, touching His lips to it, uniting it to His eternal divinity. The *drink from the brook* is thus the moment when the mortal and the immortal come together, creation and creator, God and man. It is the moment when *the Word became flesh* (Jn 1.14). Christ stoops down over the brook in order to drink. God, in other words, descends to man in order to take his fill of human nature — not in order to consume it or destroy it — but to unite it with

here, next to you. What more could you ask for?"[8]

And despite all of this, man remains as insensitive and immovable as a stone! God comes as the *voice of a gentle breeze* and imparts His grace to the prophets (3 Kg 19.12), but man quickly forgets this. God slays the false prophets (3 Kg 18.40), but this, too, man forgets. God Himself comes and grants the people miraculous victories, over which they rejoice, but soon forget (cf. Ex 17.9-13; Josh 6.12-20). God forgives the sins of Israel, and again the people rejoiced, but continued to sin, forgetting God Who forgave them (cf. Jg 2.11-13, 4.1, 13.1, etc.). He led them through the wilderness (Ex 16-17), where He fed them with manna from heaven, water from the rock, quails from the sky, and gave them everything they needed to know that God was with them, that His life was being made available to them. But in the end they forgot Him, and turned to the worship of false gods.

They arrive at the foot of lofty Mt. Sinai, where they hear the thunder, see the lightning, and hear the sound of God's voice, speaking to Moses (Ex 19). They know that Moses was called there by God, and that, after fasting for forty days and nights (Ex 24.18), he ascended to the summit. They were afraid, they trembled, they saw the mountain smoking — all of which are symbols of God's presence — and yet they nevertheless manage to lose God, to forget about Him, and build instead a golden calf! (Ex 32). They fashioned for themselves the form of a false god! But why? Because they couldn't make this Living Divinity their own. They were made for life, but having forgotten God, they became as dead. But even so they could not live without having some kind of god, even a false

Himself and to make it godlike. This is what it means when it says that *He will drink of the brook in the way*. This is the magnificence of Christ."

one of their own making, even one in the form of a brute beast.

Man, in fashioning his golden idols, unwittingly reveals his desire for God. In his sinful, deluded act of idolatry, man bears witness to the fact that he cannot live without God. God's existence is acknowledged in the very act of man's apostasy, in the very activity of setting up a false substitute intended to take God's place. And yet God once again stoops down to the children of Israel! He forgives them once again. He seeks to find some way to become theirs eternally, forever visible to them, eternally perceptible and accessible. And He does find ways.

"The desert's burning you by day, and you want to be cool. Very well. I'll become a cloud in order to refresh you (cf. Ex 13.21-22). Thus you'll realize that it is I Who stand between you and the burning sun."

"At night you want light. At night, then, I'll become a pillar of fire (Ex 13.21-22). In seeing that light in the darkness, you will know that it is Me, a reflection of my glory."

"By day you have the cloud, by night the pillar: I am with you constantly. When you set out on your journey, know that I have already risen and gone before you, so that you can see Me. When you stop to rest, I am already there, waiting for you. As you draw near to the tent of witness, I'm there, too, and you hear Me. Wherever you go, whatever you do, I am there." All of these manifestations of God are the *self-emptyings* of God (cf. Phil 2.7), by means of which God stoops down, as we said, and assumes the form of a cloud, or a pillar of fire, or the objects and furnishings of the tabernacle.

Think about the toil that God undertakes on your behalf. Think of His concern and anxiety for you, along with His patience and long-suffering. Consider His wisdom, and His great strength. He has become everything, entwined with all things, interwoven with all things: in the clouds, in the pillars of fire, on the mountain tops, in the low places, in our sins, in our cries, in everything.[9] He is everywhere. And since I know that I can't live without Him, I will never forget Him, or live apart from Him.

The cloud, the pillar, and the tent of witness, were "proofs" of God's existence and love. From the very beginning, all God has done has been to *present Himself living by many proofs.* But now, *after the passion*, comes the eternal and unfailing proof, of which all the earlier proofs were but a foreshadowing. And this proof is Christ Himself, Whom we shall see when the *veils are lifted* (cf. 2 Cor 3.13-16), and when the *riddles* are resolved (cf. 1 Cor 13.12). In the kingdom of heaven, we shall be with Him always, *face to face* (cf. 1 Cor 13.12).

Do you understand now what *by many proofs* means? Do you see God's efforts, and, at the same time, our own hardness of heart, our poverty, and our denial of Him? It's like when somebody tries to put some food in your mouth, and you won't open it; or tries to point something out to you, and you refuse to look, you refuse to learn. The one who gives is God, and the other is man. What a struggle! And instead of me struggling to know and love and partake of God, I struggle against Him! Nevertheless, God continues to pursue me, like a hunter tracking His prey, so that, one day, I might be able to stop in my tracks, turn, and see Him, and rejoice in my Hunter, Who loves me, and is so much mine.

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[9] See St. Dionysios the Areopagite, for whom God, in His self-manifestation through the act of creation, becomes "all things in all things, and nothing in any," so that the *entire* created order is a genuine theophany of God (Who is thus "all things in all things"), without this in any way reducing God to the level of creation, to which He remains absolutely transcendent (and as such is "nothing in anything," i.e., He is not a "thing" among other "things"), cf. *On the Divine Names* 7.3: "God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and unknowing. He may be named, and yet no name can lay hold of Him. He is not one among the things that are and He cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and He is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and He is known to no one from anything" (Luibheid, 108-109).

He was seen by them for forty days, speaking to them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1.3). Here we see two forms of Christ's manifestation, which are of great significance: the fact that *He was seen,* and that this was an event which unfolded over a period of *forty days.*

These are the ultimate self-revelations of Christ. They are the most dynamic manifestations of His life. This is now the definitive way that He expresses Himself, and it is not going to change. Everything transient is here put aside, and is replaced by that which abides permanently, eternally. At the same time, that which is eternal is available to all. "Even if your heart has been hardened by sin; even if you're spiritually blind; worse than the Israelites in the desert, nevertheless, I give you the means to understand these things."

Let these truths be deeply felt by us, for they are the mystery of the Church, which is the experience of Christ, the eternal Christ, extended throughout time and existing unfailingly in eternity.

He was seen by them for forty days, speaking to them about the kingdom of God. Why does it say for *forty days*? The number forty had great significance for the Jews, and occurs constantly throughout the Old Testament. The *flood continued forty days and nights upon the earth* (Gen 7.4, 17). Isaac was *forty when he married Rebecca* (Gen 25.20; cf. 26.34). David *reigned for forty years* (2 Kg 5.4; 3 Kg 2.11), as did Solomon, his son (3 Kg 11.42). Elijah received sustenance from an angel, *and went in the strength of that food for forty days and nights* (3 Kg 19.8). The manna from heaven *was eaten for forty years* (Ex 16.35). The people wandered for *forty years in the desert* (Deut 29.4; Amos 2.10). Moses remained on Sinai for *forty days and forty nights, speaking with God* (Ex 24.18, 34.28; cf. Deut 9.9).

The number forty is a symbol of completion. It signifies a fullness which admits of no further perfection. It nearly always refers to the advent of new life, of a new creation. The number seven is also an expression of completeness: God created the world in seven days (Gen 2.2-3), and thus the number seven marks an earthly, cosmic perfection. But the number forty pertains directly to God, to the acquisition of God, to participation in His life. This is why there is no "forty-first" day.

In order for Moses to see God, he had to fast for forty days (Ex 34.28; cf. Deut 9.9-11). And forty days were needed so that the Israelites could receive both the Law, and the design for the Tabernacle, which Moses was to build (Ex 25-26). The same number of days was required before they could be given the priesthood (Num 3.1). Christ fasted for forty days in order to be with His Father, and through His Father He triumphed definitively over Satan (Mk 1.13; Lk 4.2).

Thus when Luke tells us that Christ *was seen by them for forty days*, you know what this means: perfection, completion; a fullness that cannot be surpassed. It designates a perfect period of time during which the One from beyond time revealed Himself perfectly. And he chose to do this, not simply through the medium of time, but through sight, by means of vision, by *being seen*, because seeing is the most powerful of our senses, and the one which provides us with the clearest and most enduring impressions.

If I hear a voice, I'll turn my head to see who it is. If I can't see who it is, I'll go out and have a look, because what really makes an impression on me, what is unforgettable, is what I see. In one sense. the eyes are the *windows through which death enters,* as Scripture tells us (cf. Jer 9.20).[10] But it is through these same windows that God enters. This is why Christ is always presented as being *seen. looked upon,* and *beheld.* And this is why God is called *Theos,* which comes from the word *theasthai,* and literally means: "He who can be seen." This is why God is light: so that He can be seen. Thus the phrase: *He was seen by them for forty days* means that, during a perfect interval of time, Christ revealed Himself to the most powerful, the most gripping, of human senses, thereby providing us with the most compelling and permanent experience of God.

Let's try to understand these successive revelations and appearances of Christ by means of a few simple examples.

I'm talking to you but you're not listening to me. I'm talking to you and your mind's wandering. I'm talking to you and you're talking to someone else. You have no idea what I'm saying. So I grab hold of you and say: "Hey, you, come here!" I get up, take both of your hands and I draw you near to me; I assume the posture of someone who's important, and say: "Are you looking at me? Are you paying attention? Look at me!" God takes hold of man in a similar manner, unfolding Himself before him, filling his vision, so that all else disappears and He alone remains. That's what it means when it says that *He was seen by them for forty days.*

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[10] Compare Evagrios, *Commentary on Prov* 7.6-10: "*For she looks from a window out of her house into the wide streets.* Here Solomon calls human flesh a 'window,' because through it the evil one works his deceptions on those who wish to walk along the *wide and spacious streets, which lead to destruction* (cf. Mt 7.13)" (SC 340:189-190).

The vision of God is an experience so vivid, so overwhelming, that, whether you want to or not, you have to respond. For forty days and nights, God, in a sense, held their gaze; He captured their attention. And His appearance was the most powerful and the most majestic thing they had ever beheld, so that afterwards they could never say or think that they hadn't seen Him. Such is the fullness of the vision of God.

There are no longer any doubts or hesitations. The God Who appears before me is so great, so vivid, so all-encompassing, that, not only is there no room for doubt, but neither would it be possible to see Him any better. God does everything, and thus there's nothing left to be done.

Once God has taken hold of you like this, what can you say?

"Come here. Do you see me?"

"Yes, God, I see You. I recognize You: You are *my Lord and my God*" (Jn 20.28).

"Listen to Me, then."

And He spoke to them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1.3).

The moment you see Him; when you look at Him and recognize Him, when all doubt vanishes away in the light of His appearance, *then* He speaks to you. He doesn't talk to deaf ears. When God sees ears that are deaf, or inattentive to His voice, He says: *having ears do you not hear?* (Mk 8.18). And so He leaves you alone. He respects your freedom to ignore Him. But when you do look at Him, when you want Him, when you desire Him, when you listen to Him, then He says:

"Do you hear Me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Listen, then. I am the Word, *speaking to you about the kingdom of God.* I am He Who, now and forever, must be united with human nature; united forever with you, with your whole being. I am your life. I am your Word, I am *the* Word; the Uncreated Reason containing the reasons of creation. And you are a reasoning, rational creature, and thus you're a complete person only when you're united to Me. Otherwise, you don't exist."

And He spoke to them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1.3): "How can the two of us remain united, together, forever? How can all thought of separation be utterly abolished? Listen, I shall explain. I suffered, died, rose, and am ascending to the heavens, for one reason: to bring you the kingdom of God (cf. Jn 16.7; Lk 22.16, 18). *There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God, coming in power* (Mk 9.1; cf. Lk 9.27). And *this,* my beloved children, was the kingdom of God *coming in power.*

And while staying with them . . . He spoke to them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1.4, 3). What a strange thing! He said nothing to explain His passion, or any of the other mysteries surrounding His person. He left all that for the Holy Spirit. *I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away, so that the Comforter will come, the Spirit of truth, Who will reveal to you the whole truth* (cf. Jn 16.7-15).

He does not reveal anything about Himself. He does not yet open His heart and mind to man: He leaves that to the Holy Spirit. What, then, does he talk about? The *kingdom of God.* It's as if He said: "The Holy Spirit will tell you about Me. It's My task, now that we're here together, to *speak to you about the kingdom of God.*"

What, then, is the *kingdom of God*? What does the *kingdom of God* have to do with things here? Since Christ left everything to the

Holy Spirit, why didn't He leave this to the Spirit as well? Because this is the very mystery of the vision of God, of God's revelation to man, and of our communion with Him.

The kingdom of God is the place where God rests, the place where He exists. But it is not something separate from Him; not something that exists apart from Him, outside of Him. It follows, then, that the kingdom of God is God Himself. God is in His kingdom, and the kingdom is in God. God does not exist without His kingdom: just as there is no kingdom without a king, there can be no kingdom of God without God. The body cannot exist without the soul, and neither can the kingdom exist without God. The kingdom is the body of God, the body of Christ, the Church.

Thus the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, and Christ, and His Body, the Church, are one reality. The Church is the kingdom, and Christ is the King, "seated on the royal throne of the cherubim."[11] And the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ.

What, then, does it mean, when it says that Christ *spoke to them about the kingdom of God*? It means that He revealed to them the mystery of eternal union between God and man. "I am living," means that "I am living for your sake, for you to have eternal life. When you make Me your own, I live in you, and you live in Me." He reveals, in other words, the mystery of the identity between Himself and the Church as His mystical body.

It's as if Christ is saying: "Today I present Myself to you living, but from now on, it will be the kingdom itself, the Church itself, that will render Me present. From now on, whenever you gather together, *you* will be My living person and image. You are the Church. Since you've forgotten all about the *pillar of fire* and the

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[11] From the prayer of the Cherubic Hymn, *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.*

cloud; since you are indifferent to My kindnesses, and do not understand My love; because you use the trust I've shown you to your own detriment, I'm trying to find something so human, so essential, so simple, that you won't be able to manage without Me."

"I'm searching," He says, "to find the perfect and most natural way of communicating My living presence to you, so that I will be unceasingly in your blood, in your bones, in your flesh."

And He finds the way: before all the ages, He creates the eternal Church. Once and for all He *opens the heavens and lowers the great sheet, filled with things clean and unclean* (cf. Acts 10.9-16). Once and for all, God pitches His tent among us, and ties it firmly to the ground, thereby uniting heaven and earth.[12]

"I have found a way to keep you from falling away from Me, unless of course that is what you deliberately choose. Unless you say: 'I reject you, God. I don't want you. I want to be rid of you. Go away, God.' Provided you don't say 'Go away, God,' you will remain united with Me."

What, then, is our gathering together in the liturgy, our membership in the Church? When *two or three of you are gathered together*, you can become Christ, because *where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there in the midst of them* (Mt 18.20). Who is this "I" *in the midst of them*? It doesn't have the sense of some fourth person joining us, but signifies who we are together, it is

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12. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts* 22: "What is this sheet? It is a symbol of the whole world that would be evangelized by the Apostles" (NPNF 11:143-44); and Evagrios, *Commentary on Prov* 31.24: "*She makes fine linen sheets*: the 'fine linen sheet' that appeared on the housetop to Peter (Acts 10.9) was a symbol of the entire sensible world. For the various animals contained within it were signs of the various modes of life of those of those purified by the cross of Christ" (SC 340:470).

what we become when we are together, because *in the midst* of you, where you are, is Christ. So you cease to be yourselves, and together become Christ.

Thus, when it says that *He spoke to them about the kingdom of God*, it's as if He told them: "In my wisdom, in my infinite love, I have found the perfect way, which is also the most human, and the easiest way for you to love and possess Me."

This is why it says: *If you don't love your neighbor, your brother, whom you have at your side, how can you love God?* (cf. 1 Jn 4.20). And this is because my neighbor is visible, *he can be seen* (1 Jn 4.20); his life is like mine, he thinks like I do, he loves and hates in the same way that I do. We are bound to all those around us, and through them to God, since we are drawn to the invisible by means of the visible. Thus *he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God Whom he has not seen* (1 Jn 4.20).

"Your neighbor," Christ is saying, "the *one whom you see*, is a sinner, just like you are, a fallen man, *walking about in the darkness* (Jn 12.35), overshadowed by demonic power. But he is called to become a *partaker of divine nature* (2 Pt 1.4), and can become Me for you, and the means of your union with Me."

"Go, then, because the two of you are enough. When you gather in My name, when you join together for worship in the life-giving assembly, I live in you, I become you. And no matter what happens, no matter what you do, as long as you remain in this community, sheltered under the roof of this sacred tabernacle, we shall be as one. You start to rub your eyes, and you touch Me. You want to scratch your ear, and you touch Me. You rest your hand on your leg, and you touch Me. Your heart beats, you place your hand over it, and you feel the beating of My heart, the pulse of My Spirit. Somebody speaks and you hear Me. You're in pain, and it is My suffering that you feel. You rejoice, and the mystery of the joy that I came to give (cf. Jn 16.22) becomes palpable, so that you enjoy it all the more. In other words, because you cling so closely to the earth, and are not willing to be raised up from there, you are not capable of becoming living revelations of God. And that is why I stoop down and humble Myself and become as you are."

"You want that which is visible. You prefer the earth, and the company of your fellow man. So be it. You shall find Me in your neighbor, in your fellow man. For all time I establish Myself within My Church, and henceforth from there I will *make all things new* (cf. Rev 21.5), giving you new and eternal life. Just as My own flesh was divinized and became Spirit, so too will I make you Spirit. What more can I do for you? This is the most direct, and the simplest way for you to see, love, approach, and take hold of God. Have the *two of you gathered together* for Me? For My sake? Then I am there *in the midst of you* (Mt 18.20). I, Who became a pillar of fire, a cloud overshadowing the desert, Who thundered and flashed with lightning on the summit of Sinai: what means did I not employ? And now I become a drop of blood. A quantity of flesh. 'But I can't eat raw flesh,' you say, and thus I provide you with bread, your daily nourishment, which is readily, easily obtained, so that you won't have to wear yourself out looking for it. I take the bread you eat and I make it Christ!"

"And since you can't eat bread without wine, I take your wine, which you enjoy, which *gladdens your heart* (Ps 103.15), and I make that Christ, too. I do not offer you that which you don't want, what you're not capable of receiving, or what frightens or revolts you, but the very things you need and long for. You'd like a glass of wine. I become an overflowing chalice! You drink it, and you're drinking Me!"

Do you see how easy Christ is, how simple!

"And I am not present only when you are eating and drinking, but I am everywhere, in all things that you do. When you go to pray, or gather together to worship, I am there. Wherever two of you are gathered together, I am there. That's where My kingdom is. That's where My Church is. That's where heaven is. Eternity. God. That's where you become gods."

"There's nothing higher for you to wish for. There's nothing simpler for you to do. Something as simple as winding your watch or getting up and walking from one place to another, is more difficult than becoming Christ."

"Tell me, then, what more can I do for you? How low shall I bend? How close shall I come to you? How deeply shall I enter into your life, your being? Tell me. In order to touch Me, you don't even have to stretch out your hand."

And God, the *God Who is* (cf. Ex 3.14), Who is "enthroned in the heavens," is now "present here among us."[13] God has now come to join me. He remains perfectly and unceasingly united to me. He adheres to me like glue, whether I like it or not, and His adhesion is perfect, and thus I am able to share in His life.[14] I can partake of

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[13] From the prayer before the elevation of the *Amnos, Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom.*

[14] See the Elder's comments on Ps 62.9 (= *Let us Rejoice in the Lord*, 30-31): "David's state of mind is simple, namely, not to be separated from God, which is why he says: *my soul clings closely behind You.* The strength necessary for such a union comes directly from God: *Your right hand has upheld me*, which means, 'Your grace upholds me.' Working together, my free will and God's grace can accomplish all things. St. Athanasios understands the verse as follows: 'Not even for a moment, my God, can my spirit be separated from You, for I am afire with ardent love, and, as if my mind were a mass of glue, I adhere to You in desire'." See St. Athanasios, *Com-*

His own experiences, His own holiness, His own breath, His perfection, His divinity, His glory, of everything, in the end, that is Christ Himself.

And *He Who is* (Ex 3.14) becomes "He Who is present here among us." That is the meaning of *While they were all gathered together, He charged them not to depart from Jerusalem* (Acts 1.4).

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Question: Elder, you've spoken so beautifully and so vividly about how easy it is for God, the *One Who is*, to become "present among us." But for Him to become so for all of us, for each of us personally, I don't see that as being so simple. Is it really, in actual fact, so simple?

Answer: Yes, it's very simple. The purpose of our life has been revealed to us. But when I don't live for this, there's nothing Christ can do. Take, for example, a monk who comes to the monastery because life here is beautiful. Take a monk who comes here because he wants to contribute something to the life of the community. Or take another monk who comes here because of the love he senses. None of them are coming for God. They're seeking human things, and human things are what they'll find. Christ is certainly with them, but He's not active, because they can't receive Him. They aren't looking for Christ. Or take a monk who thinks certain things in the monastery are not done properly, or fairly, and seeks a certain kind of justice. Well, he may find something human, but he won't find God. And the same is true for the one who came here to work, and the other who came to live in idleness. They'll find it. We

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mentary on Ps 62 (PG 27:280, lines 19-22), where the image of the "mass of glue" (*kolla*) is inspired by the words: *my soul clings* (*ekollethe*) *closely behind You.*

find what we seek, what we're looking for. Thus we can all be gathered here together, and the Holy Spirit can come and visit everyone but me. Why? Because I wasn't waiting for Him. I'm here for something else, I'm looking for something else, and that's what I'll get, but not the Holy Spirit. *Seek and you will find* (Mt 7.7). And what will you find? Whatever you're looking for, *because whatsoever you ask the Father in my name, He will give it to you* (cf. Jn 15.16).

You can't seek Christ and at the same time be seeking something else. It doesn't work that way, even if what you're seeking is something holy. That's why it says *He was seen by them, appearing to them, visible to them* (cf. Acts 1.3). If you come and sit down right in front of me, will I be able to see anything else? Not a thing. My only experience will be of your immediate presence. And, because you're so close, I can't even see you properly. If I hold a book too close to my face, I can't read it, can I? All I can see is something covering my eyes, like a cloud. And God is even closer than that, and thus He can *be seen* but, at the same time, He remains invisible, incomprehensible. God is incomprehensible, and all that we can comprehend of Him is His incomprehensibility.[15] We understand, then, to the degree that we seek, to the extent we comprehend, as much as we make room for. That's what we need to learn: the more we open our heart, the more we'll receive God.

Another Question: Elder, you said that Christ did not bear witness to His own person, but left it to the Holy Spirit to reveal afterwards. But doesn't the *by many proofs* include a kind of witness to Himself?

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[15] See St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 28.4 (Second Theological Oration) (LNPNF 7:289-290); St. John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* (FOTC 72, *passim*); and St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 1.4: "It is clear that God exists, but what He is in essence and nature is unknown and beyond all understanding . . . the Divinity is limitless and incomprehensible, and this His limitlessness and incomprehensibility is all that can be understood about Him" (FOTC 37:171, 172).

Answer: There is another Who bears witness concerning Me (Jn 5.2), He says. Concerning Himself, He speaks in parables. Seen *by many proofs*, yes, but in *proofs*, in evidence, that is, of His life, His actions, His love, and of the fact that He was living. But He left it to the Father and the Holy Spirit to bear witness to Him. And to John the Baptist, too, who was His precursor (cf. Jn 1.7, 15, 19-20, 32-34).

CONCLUSION

To live for Christ is the most natural thing to do. It is as natural as one person seeking to love another. Life seeks life. And the ontological character, as we say, of this simple fact, in its highest, perfected form, is holiness. It's the kingdom of Heaven, the Church. It's me living in Christ, which means that the source of my life, the life which lives within me, is the Person of Christ Himself (cf. Gal 2.20). It's not something vague or indefinite. If I told you, for example, to "love justice," that would be abstract and cold. It would be like saying, "love that table." But if I say, "love that young woman; love that beautiful person, that sweet, warm-hearted soul," it would be different. Unlike the table, or some idea, she's got feelings, a heart, tenderness, and affection: everything that I have. Her heart beats just like mine does. And I can take her in my arms, love her, bring her into my home, and make her my wife. It is thus the *person* who loves, and who, through love, is united to another person.

And how personal God is! That's why He became man; that's why the Second Person of the Trinity *became flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn 1.14), so that we might be able to love Him and receive Him.

God became like us, for the sake of us all.

What I've given you today are a few, scattered images of Christ and His descent and *self-emptying* (cf. Phil 2.14). What He did in the womb of the Theotokos, He has continued to do, and will continue to do, until the day when life is no more.[16] There has not been a single day, a single moment, when Christ has not emptied Himself on our behalf. And thus *you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich* (2 Cor 8.9).

We are living now with Christ in the period after His resurrection. And if we are awaiting the arrival of Pentecost, it means we are waiting for the revelation of the Holy Spirit, which will also be the revelation of a new human being. When He comes, He will brood over our dark and chaotic souls (cf. Gen 1.2); light will shine in the darkness (cf. Gen 1.3), and the divine breath will again wed itself to the dust, creating a new a mixture of earth and divinity (cf. Gen 2.7).

From beginning to end, revelation is one, whole, and unified. From the time when the *earth was void and without form* (Gen 1.1-2), to the final *Amen* that closes the book of Revelation, all of Scripture reveals God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One passage throws light on another. One passage inspires another, and all things, together and separately, reveal Christ. Like the life-giving bread of the Eucharist, vivified by the descent of the Spirit, the whole Christ is present both in the whole of Scripture, and in each of its smallest parts.

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[16] See above, chap. 1, n. 19.

7. THE ETERNAL MARRIAGE*

FIRST ASSEMBLY

I

Monasticism is a marriage in which the Bridegroom is always Christ. Here in the convent, however, we don't talk very much about Christ as the Bridegroom.[1] For many women, such talk is overshadowed by various emotional considerations, and often leads to confusion and misunderstandings in their daily lives. Rather than being a fruitful concept that can lead a woman to Christ, it becomes something that atrophies her existence. But when we say that Christ is our "Bridegroom," this has nothing to do with hearts-and-flowers emotionalism, sentimental ideas about romance, misdirected love, or false comparisons.[2]

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* Delivered at the Holy Cenobium of the Annunciation, Ormylia, 13 May, 1978.

[1] The virgin's (or nun's) "espousal" with Christ is inspired by the language of Is 62.5 (*As a bridegroom will rejoice over a bride, so will the Lord rejoice over thee*, cf. Is 61.10), as well as 2 Cor 11.2 (*I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband*), along with other New Testament passages that refer to Christ as a "Bridegroom" (e.g., Mt 9.15; Mt 25.1; Jn 3.29; Rev 21.2, 9; cf. Eph 5.22-33). The notion of a spiritual or mystical marriage between Christ and the soul was firmly in place by the middle of the second century, and received extensive treatment in patristic commentaries on the Song of Songs. It has been suggested that the summit of women's ascetical striving is the mystical wedding of the soul with her bridegroom, Christ, whereas male ascetics seek their highest good through mystical knowledge (*gnosis*) of God. But such a distinction should not be exaggerated, since the nature, practice, and aim of monastic life remains the same for both men and women. (And that the notion of a "mystical marriage" was neither restricted to women nor limited to the early patristic period, see below, n. 21).

[2] Similar cautions are voiced by St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1: "Let no one bring passionate, fleshly thoughts or a garment of con-

Comparisons between an ordinary bridegroom and Christ are essentially attempts to compare the characteristics of a particular man with God. More precisely, they are attempts to compare a particular man with one who is *both* God *and* man, because Christ is not simply God, but the Word of God *Who became flesh* (Jn 1.14).[3] We may therefore perceive Him, approach Him, *touch Him with our hands*, know Him, understand Him, and love Him (cf. 1 Jn 1.1). Indeed it would be a great misfortune if our Bridegroom were God as such, and not the incarnate Christ, Who is both perfect God and perfect man.

Having said this, let us consider some of the difficulties in our daily life and experience that prevent us from enjoying our Bridegroom, either as God or man. As we shall see, these are not stumbling blocks that have been placed on our path by the devil; neither are they limitations imposed on us by nature, but they are rather obstacles and problems of our own design and creation. They cripple us, destroy us, and render us incapable of perceiving the beauty of the Bridegroom, Who is *more beautiful than the sons of men* (Ps 44.2).

II

Someone might say that the nun's heavenly Bridegroom, to Whom she has been betrothed by the Church, has a single, though not in-

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science unsuitable for the divine nuptials (cf. Mt 22.11). Let no one be bound up in his own thoughts, or drag the pure words of the Bridegroom and the Bride down into earthly, irrational passions. . . . [Because] what is described there (i.e., in the Song of Songs) is a marriage; but what is understood is the union of the human soul with God" (McCambley, 43).

3. Compare St. Methodios of Olympus, *The Banquet* 7.8, which depicts the incarnation as a symbolic "wedding between Christ and his pure flesh, for the sake of which He abandoned the home of His heavenly Father" (SC 95:194).

significant, disadvantage when compared with other suitors and future husbands: He is invisible and devoid of flesh.

Any ordinary fiancé, with whom a girl is involved, is obviously present in the flesh and visible. Nobody falls in love with a bare soul. You love a soul to the extent that it animates a body. In the same way, it would be impossible to love someone based solely on, say, a series of letters he had written, without building up a picture of that person's character, appearance, face, body, background, and other details. You don't love someone in the abstract, but rather a particular person, a concrete individual; someone with distinctive handwriting, with a mother and a father, to whom he'll convey your regards; who has an aunt you've met, and a sister you went to school with, along with everything else that is part of embodied existence and life in society. With such a person, you can communicate fully.

In comparison, one could argue that Christ is at a disadvantage. And this is why some women, who are thinking about becoming nuns, often voice the following complaint, or rather fear, which is ultimately a form of self-justification: "But I don't feel Christ; I don't sense His presence; I don't know Him."

For a novice, such worries come and go, although one might want to ask her why exactly she's planning on entering a convent in the first place. But if such a person has already been tonsured a nun, then another, more tragic question needs to be asked: "Why did you become a nun, if the one you love is simply a figment of your imagination; somebody you've only heard about, but whom you don't actually know? It seems that the God to whom you've wed yourself is merely a shadowy, disembodied idea, and thus is as much good to you as a ghost."

That is what someone might say. But is it like that in reality? Does such a perspective provide us with an accurate picture? Does it yield a true vision of Christ? When compared to ordinary suitors, is Christ in fact invisible and devoid of flesh? Or is this perhaps the consequence of a weakness in the eyes of the spirit, a sickness in the soul? Is this not in fact the perspective of a person who has already begun a descent into hell? Because for a monk or a nun, there's no greater hell than to think that Christ is invisible and devoid of flesh. That would be a complete and utter failure of their monastic life.

Is, then, the Bridegroom invisible? Is the relationship between the nun and Christ something lacking in all objectivity? Is it simply the product of a mind imprisoned, of hopes dashed, of a soul self-condemned to hell, to life without God, in a paralyzing twilight of separation and isolation? Is Christ invisible? Is He immaterial, devoid of flesh?

Let's begin our response to these questions by calling to mind a number of basic points. In the first place, to say that Christ is "invisible" is to display great ignorance of, and lack of faith in, the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. None of the fathers of the Church, and none of the saints, has ever said that God, and in particular Christ, was invisible.

Instead, they make a distinction. On the one hand, they all proclaim that God is invisible in His essence, because it is not possible for finite, created nature to perceive the infinite, uncreated nature of God. On the other hand, they confess that the same God is visible in His energy, in His activity, and even more so from the moment *He became flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn 1.14). It is not, then, to an abstract, disincarnate idea of God that they witness, but to *that which they heard, which they saw with their eyes, and which they looked upon and touched with their hands: the Word of life* (cf. 1 Jn 1.1).[4]

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[4] Compare Evagrios, *Exhortation to a Virgin* 55: "Virgin eyes shall behold the

God is also visible because He is light (cf. Jn 1.4; 8.12), and thus He can be seen from thousands of angles. It's as if you had an enormous room, entirely filled with mirrors, so that you could see someone, not once, but hundreds of times. In the same way, you can see Christ thousands of times in thousands of ways. Both Scripture and Tradition bear witness to this. Indeed, the saints talk about nothing else but their vision of God and their passion for Christ: the two great privileges that Christ grants to those whom He loves.

When a man becomes engaged to a woman, he asks only two things of her: that she will always be his, and that she will love only him. Christ asks the same things from a woman who wants to become a nun.

For her part, a woman asks a man to be hers forever, to cease living his life alone, apart from her; to no longer have rights over his own body, his soul, or his future, but to give himself to her, to be daily visible to her, to be always her husband, to be always the man who's won her. If, on the contrary, she saw that it was her job to win him, she'd seek a divorce.

The soul desires something similar when she seeks to enter into a relationship with Christ. She wants Him to be daily visible to her, to be her Savior and Spouse, Who will order His relationship to her in accordance with her desire. The soul wants, as it were, to have rights to the body and soul of Christ. That is, she wants ex-

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Lord, and the ears of virgins shall hear His words. The mouth of virgins shall kiss the Bridegroom, and the nose of virgins shall be drawn to the fragrance of His perfumes. Virgin hands shall touch the Lord, and their chastity of the flesh shall prove acceptable. The virgin soul shall be crowned, and she will live with her Bridegroom always" (Sinkewicz, 135).

actly what the Lord has promised: to be faithful and to maintain, with no regrets or hesitations, His commitments to her. And when did the Lord promise these things to the soul? In all that He said and did in the history of Israel, in the life of the Church, through the mouths of the apostles and the saints, and through the Holy Spirit speaking in Councils. At the same time, He addresses Himself in the same way to each soul individually.

The other thing the soul wants is for Christ to win her, to conquer her. This means that the soul must be a thing that's given up, handed over, and surrendered to God. It must long for Him, suffer for His sake constantly. It must resign all authority it had over itself and give everything to God, and it must do this with the disposition of a martyr, so that it might be conquered by the will, power, and greatness of Christ.

Just as no one loves someone who is devoid of flesh, neither does the soul have any interest in an "invisible" Christ. The soul is not capable of being moved by desire for an "invisible" God. And this is why the experience of the Church bears witness, not to a God who cannot be seen, but to the *Word made flesh* (Jn 1.14). God the Word did not, as certain heretics claimed, merely inhabit the body of a particular man, as if He were hiding behind the mask of someone else's face.[5] But He Himself, in His own Person, was conceived in the womb of the Theotokos, clothing Himself in the fullness of human nature, inseparably, indivisibly, uniquely and without change.[6] Christ is unique in having "clothed Himself" in human flesh.[7]

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[5] See, for example, the heresy of Nestorios, a fifth-century archbishop of Constantinople, who did not teach an actual incarnation, but rather a tenuous "indwelling" of the Son of God in the body of a particular man from Nazareth called Jesus. His critics charged him with dividing Christ into two subjects (i.e., God the Word and the man Jesus), and with having reduced Christ to an "inspired man," in whom God dwelt as He did "in the prophets."

We love Christ because we are able to perceive Him as flesh. And we love Him because it was by *becoming flesh* (Jn 1.4) that He saved us. Moreover, He did not clothe Himself in a body that he later discarded, as somehow not being His own, because then we would not be able to say that He was truly united to it, that it was truly His. He did not and never will cast aside His flesh, because that would be unnatural, just as it is unnatural for the soul to be separated from its body.[8] This is why death, which is the separation of body and soul, appears to most people to be the most absurd and meaningless thing of all. It is, of course, the prelude to the resurrection, when body and soul will be reunited. Death is a stage of recreation in the reformation of human nature in general, and of each person in particular.

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[6] Three of the four adverbs in this sentence ("inseparably, indivisibly, without change") are taken directly from the *Definition of Faith* promulgated by the Fourth Ecumenical Council, which met in Chalcedon in 451 AD; cf. Fr. John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1975), 25-26.

[7] That the Word of God "clothed" Himself in human nature is a traditional image for describing the incarnation. See, for example, St. Proklos of Constantinople, *Homily* 1: "She (i.e., the Theotokos) is the purest fleece, drenched with the dew which came down from heaven (cf. Jg 6.37-38), whereby the Shepherd clothed Himself with the sheep. . . . (She is) the awesome loom of the divine economy, upon which the robe of union (cf. Jn 19.23) was ineffably woven" (Constas, 137); and id., *Homily* 5: "O Virgin, maiden who knew not man, and mother who knew not pain! Where did you find the flax to weave the robe with which the Lord of creation has clothed Himself today? What sort of loom was your womb, upon which you wove the tunic without seam? (cf. Jn 19.23). . . . In order to mend the ruined robe (i.e., of Adam), Wisdom (i.e., Christ) became a weaver in the virginal workshop, and by means of a shuttle propelled by divine artifice, She clothed Herself in the robe of the body" (ibid., 233).

[8] That Christ had "discarded" His body in the course of his ascension into heaven, having "deposited" it in the sun, was an ancient heresy that sought authorization in Ps 18:6: *In the sun He has set His tabernacle* (i.e., His body), *and He comes forth as a bridegroom out of His chamber; He will exult as a giant to run His course.* This

Christ, then, is neither invisible nor devoid of flesh: He *is* flesh (cf. Jn 1.14). We love Him *Who was manifested in the flesh* and was *preached to all the nations* as God incarnate (1 Tim 3.16). He did not merely put on some temporary, outward form of flesh, but, as the Apostle says, He was "manifested" in the flesh, and that same flesh consequently became the manifestation of God.

Christ is the Word of God uniquely made flesh, and it is impossible for this ever to be undone or abolished. If the thought enters our mind that Christ is invisible or devoid of flesh, and that we have fallen in love with a fantasy, we should recognize immediately that such a thought is a lie, *for every spirit which does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God* (1 Jn 4.3).

Who can *stretch forth his hand* and lay hold of mere desire? (cf. Jn 20.27). Who *covers the feet* of a dream *with kisses, and anoints them with tears*? (cf. Lk 7.38). Who could possibly live so alone, having as his companion nothing but the empty air? But everything that we desire, all that we long for, we find in its fullness in Jesus Christ.

He was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim 3.16). The meaning of these words is exceptionally powerful. Christ is exactly how we want Him to be; He is precisely what we desire, and He is infinitely greater than any earthly bridegroom.

peculiar belief, ascribed to the Gnostic Hermogenes, was refuted by Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpts from the Prophets* 56.4 (PG 9:724C-725A).

III

But even though Christ is the kind of Bridegroom that we have just described, how is it possible for us to embrace Him? How exactly can we experience the joy of being with Him? How can we come to know the sweetness of His touch? How can we love Him? How, in other words, does Christ become the visible and palpable Bridegroom of the soul?

Here it will suffice to speak briefly, since this is something we've talked about repeatedly, and which we'll address again in the days to come. As you know, we do not come together in these assemblies to discuss matters of doctrine or problems in ethics. Neither is it my purpose here to offer you personal counseling or advice. Instead, we are here to participate in an event of communion. Our eyes are all focused on the same thing: a particular point or moment in the life of Christ. And because we are all looking at Christ, we are able to behold our imperfections or accomplishments; we see our movement forward or our disengagement and retreat. And thus our assemblies are communications with God Himself, Who sometimes reveals one thing to us, and sometimes another. But He doesn't work systematically, or academically, because then He wouldn't be the Bridegroom. In one moment, a bridegroom will declare his love to you, but then he may say something about the house he's hoping to build, or speak to you of his family and friends. Most times he'll be happy to see you, and embrace you, but sometimes he can be severe. But every time there'll be something different, something specific. In just this way, our assemblies provide us with a glimpse, a vision, of a specific aspect of our relationship to Christ.

On the one hand, then, we have Christ the Bridegroom, and, on the other, the human soul. And we understand the soul to be truly betrothed to Christ, which means that it has a certain potential and possibility to see Him.

When we say that Christ is visible, or that we can see Him, we mean that He is visible both to the eyes of the spirit and to those of the body. And because He is incarnate, because He's flesh, this means that the possibility exists, not merely for us to see, but to partake of the flesh of God. And we do so in many different ways.

But let's look now at the soul that loves a specific person: the Person of Christ, the *Theanthropos.*[9]

Before us is Christ the Bridegroom, along with His bride, in this case, the nun. Since the Church has betrothed her in marriage to Christ, it means that they've already enjoyed a degree of communion. It means that they already had some kind of relationship to each other; that they had made a pledge to each other, however slight, and that pledge was an experience which confirmed to the nun the existence of Christ in the flesh.[10]

If, however, someone has not had such an experience, but nevertheless becomes a monk or a nun, then we have a serious problem. Such people will suffer much pain in their lives. Not that they'll never come to know Christ or taste His sweetness, but that they will do so only through the cross and through pain.

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[9] *Theanthropos,* or "Godman," is a title that has been ascribed to the Incarnate Word of God since at least the third century.

[10] Compare St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Texts* 76: "The grace of the Holy Spirit is given as a pledge to souls that are betrothed to Christ; and just as without a pledge a woman cannot be sure that her union with her man will take place, so the soul will have no firm assurance that it will be joined for all eternity with its Lord and God, or be united with Him mystically and inexpressibly, or enjoy His unapproachable beauty, unless it receives the pledge of His grace and consciously possesses Him within itself" (*Philokalia,* 4:40).

Pain is one of the most powerful and palpable sensations that we experience. When you're in pain, you can understand another person's soul in a way that doesn't happen under ordinary circumstances. Suppose you've been married for twenty, thirty, or forty years, and suddenly your husband or wife is taken ill and rushed to the hospital, during which time you never leave their side. In those four or five days in the hospital, you can get to know them better than you did during the twenty or more years that you've been married to them.

Pain, then, is the most sensitive of the senses; in a very real way, it is a form of communion, an extension of one person to another. If someone is insensitive to, and incapable of understanding others, it means that God has not granted him the gift of sensitivity that follows on the experience of pain. And a person who has not felt pain is not likely to experience the pleasures of paradise. Without pain there can be no perfection. To be sure, God did not create man in order for him to feel pain, but rather to know pleasure, which is why He *placed him in the garden of Delight* (Gen 2.15). And there are nuns for whom the convent is paradise and every day they delight in the presence of Christ.

Such a nun draws up her existence — her life, all her feelings and thoughts — from the deep well which is Christ, the *Life of the world* (cf. Jn 4.14; 6.33), Who deigns to become *her* life. Her life is hidden from human eyes, hidden from the world, *hidden with Christ in God* (Col 3.3). She lives in seclusion with Christ; she lives exclusively with and for Him alone.[11] Of course, she lives in her environment, in her community, in her convent; wherever God has put her. But wherever she lives, she lives in seclusion, in solitude. She has moments that are exclusively hers: moments that may be dark, that may be bright, that may be filled with dreadful struggles, but which also might be leaps toward heaven. She has, in other words, her own experiences, which she draws from her personal relationship with Christ.

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[11] Compare St. Gregory Palamas, *To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia* 23: "She who

But a monk or a nun in a monastery who does not have a personal relationship with Christ will never feel comfortable there. They'll always be miserable, downcast, and feel diminished. In the end, they will never love God, because you can't love God if you haven't seen Him. You can't love Him if you don't live with Him exclusively, in devoted seclusion.

This is why I'm so pleased and proud of you when at night I see the lights on in your cells, and I sense that each one of you, somewhere, is living with her Christ, either alone in her cell, or, now that summer's here, walking outside.

A nun can also experience Christ in her moments of darkness, in her experience of His absence. But in order to do so she must have faith that He is present, that she is living with Him. Living with Christ! In some way, she keeps in step with Him, even if she doesn't see Him, because she knows Him, understands Him. And we know that faith is especially strong in a soul that has been tempered in solitude, silence, and deep inner stillness.

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is really a virgin — who models herself on Him Who is a virgin, Who was born of a Virgin, and Who is the Bridegroom of the souls that live in true virginity — will shun not merely carnal wedlock but also worldly companionship, having renounced all kindred, so that like St. Peter she can boldly say to Christ, *we have left all and followed You* (Mt 19.27)" (*Philokalia*, 4:301).

Thus when we say that a nun is a "bride of Christ," we most certainly have in mind a nun who enjoys the company of Christ, and walks together with Him, as Adam did with God in paradise (cf. Gen 3.9-10). And this applies to any nun, whether she lives in a convent or in a cave or anywhere else. It holds true irrespective of her daily routine, whether she's a door-keeper, a worker in the guest-house, or an official representative of the monastery. Whatever she does, she will walk next to Christ in paradise, even if it is only the paradise of her desire to walk with Him. And this "walking" with Christ gives her certain rights; it is a condition, a presupposition for her life in the resurrection. Because when she *does* arrive in paradise, she will not be a stranger in a strange land. She will not be meeting her husband for the first time. In the next life, she will not be confused or uncertain about who Christ is, since her footsteps had long been measured against His; it was His name that she had long carried in her heart.

Now we're talking about a real nun, one who is entirely consumed by the desire for solitude and lives out that desire with great intensity. I'm in my solitude. Sometimes it's dark and sometimes it's painful. At times I may be downcast, feeling that my existence is tragic, as if I had committed a terrible crime for which I am now confined to a prison cell, isolated and separated from Christ. At times like this, Christ for me is invisible, intangible. I may remember having heard, or read, that Christ is visible, but I am tormented by the thought that this may be a lie.

That is what it means to live tragically. But this too is part of my existence within solitude. It is not disillusionment or disappointment with monastic life, neither is it the experience of unhappiness or depression. It is simply an experience that I have. In essence it's part of my *search* for my Lord, for my Christ, *my beloved* (cf. Song 3.1-4).

At other times, however, I experience flashes of insight, exhilaration, and joy. And there is no one, not even the most tragic and darkened figure, who is without such flashes of divinity. Christ is God for everyone: He was seen by criminals and petty thieves; the painted eyes of harlots beheld Him. Will He, then, withhold Himself from a soul that seeks Him, and has renounced all things in order to follow Him? It is not possible.

If there is such a God, Who refuses to appear to souls seeking Him in the darkness, then it's certainly not our God. Our God is the One Who *appeared to those sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death* (cf. Mt 4.16). It is in Him that we believe, it is He Who is real, Who is the *way, the truth, and the life* (Jn 14.16), and Who is therefore my way, my life, and my truth. That's why it's out of the question for me not to feel Him, or be without flashes of insight, inner understanding, assurance and certitude.[12] At times I'll make progress, at other times I'll regress. It's like a tide that ebbs and flows, or a river with many bends and turns. But it will all be wonderful, because it's the story of my life in God. Our only reality is what we are living and experiencing this very moment. It is not the position we occupy in the monastery, it is not our obedience to the abbess, it is not my humility, and not even my love. All of these are necessary, like so much cement and stones that help to consolidate our life in God.[13]

There will come moments, as we said, when we will be subject to change. At times my tenderness and my love for God will be foremost, but at other times I'll become hard, darkened by passion, feeling spurned and filled with hatred for God, and I'll say: "Now where's He run off to?"[14] However, if I continue to struggle, I'll discover that this passion, this hatred for God that wells up within me, is in fact created by a demon, a devil. But I won't see him until much later. It's still much too early for me to be able to believe that this devil is there for me. At this stage, the devil is completely unknown to me, even more hidden and mysterious than God.

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[12] On "assurance" and "certitude," see above, chap. 5, n. 4.

[13] Compare St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Texts* 77: "What witnesses are to a contract, the virtues and the practice of the commandments are to spiritual betrothal: through them everyone who is going to be saved secures the consummation of the pledge" (*Philokalia*, 4:40).

But this is not all. In the midst of my stillness, or during moments of sustained silence, when I may be reading or at prayer, I may begin to despair of myself. Now pay special attention: this is not despair of God, in view of His imminent arrival, when I hear His footsteps approaching and haven't got time even to open the door before He bursts in and is standing before me. No. I mean moments when I begin to despair of myself. I may also experience something of this sort when I'm sitting quietly, perhaps fatigued from prayer, worn down by lack of sleep, or exhausted from vigils and fasting. At such times I may feel that I have God and yet don't have Him; that, even though I've touched Him, He continues to elude my grasp.

Sometimes, during such moments, when our heart, in a flutter, is ready to leap out toward someone, we suddenly have the sensation of being filled full. By what? By God? No, because we have already been filled by God, since, as we said, we are completely occupied by God at all times. In a manner beyond anything that transpires between human couples, I am totally contained within God, as He is contained within me. God is already within me, outside me, all around me; He is woven into my flesh, my brain, down to the smallest particles that constitute my being.

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[14] Ibid., 80: "If the bridegroom-to-be is delayed abroad or kept away by other business, and puts off the marriage for a while, and if the bride-to-be, indignant, rejects his love, erasing or tearing up the document that contains the pledge, she immediately loses all right to what she expected from him. The same is true where the soul is concerned. For if a person engaged in spiritual warfare should say 'How long must I suffer?' and begin to evade the rigor of the ascetic life . . . then at once he forfeits completely the pledge given and his hope in God" (*Philokalia*, 4:41).

That which fills me, then, is unbounded desire, which is rising in me like a fever, so that I feel like I'm dying, lost, slipping away; that my brain has dissolved in the heat of the flame and I no longer understand what's happening to me. I am filled, in other words, with fire. This is not, however, the fire of God, but rather my own experience that God is *a consuming fire* (Heb 12.29). It is my growing awareness that God is approaching, about to appear, even though I don't yet see Him. And then, suddenly, the fire changes and becomes a flood. This is what David means when he says that *God dwells in the flood* (Ps 28.3, 10). We are flooded and filled with a deluge of divine energy.

When I'm filled with this fire, and when I'm drenched with this deluge of divine energy, I feel overcome, overwhelmed, utterly spent, but with a weariness that is neither that of the body nor the soul. It is an intensification of my longing for God, and thus I wonder: "Where are you, God? Why haven't I seen you yet, God?"

Slowly, by degrees, this feeling of longing, this weariness, subsides, and the soul delights in a feeling of spiritual joy, profound peace, and inner stillness. At such times, one person will want to kneel, another will be moved to pray, another to shed tears, another to rest. Someone else may go to see a brother monk, or a sister nun, in order to talk about what he is feeling. Others again will keep silent, because what you externalize, you usually lose. Through speech, we expose, diminish and often completely dissipate our innermost being, our very self. In this case, what you stand to lose is God Himself. Hide Him, then, as you would a treasure, so as not to lose Him.

This feeling of spiritual joy gradually becomes a permanent feature of your life. When it does, it remains with you wherever you go, no matter what you do: walking, sleeping, staying awake, going somewhere, in the company of others or when you're alone. It's like something that's stuck on your skin, like a powerful glue or adhesive: it won't come off. That's how spiritual joy adheres to the soul.[15]

This joy is a gift of God, which he bestows on us in our abandonment, in proportion to our desire, and to the degree of our solitude. Such joy may be known by souls not living in solitude, but it will always be transient and fragile. It will never become their permanent possession. The more a soul is engrossed in earthly affairs; the more burdened it is with the cares of life; the more it seeks to involve itself in vain pursuits, then the more it loses the joy bestowed upon it by God.

Conversely, the more the soul withdraws from such things, the more intensely it will experience the gift of God's joy. The soul then begins to feel that, wherever it happens to be, and whatever it happens to be doing, Christ is now its central focus, the central object of its concern and attention. I speak to Christ, and He speaks to me. I wake up in the morning, and the words of the Jesus Prayer are already on my lips. And with these same words I drift off into sleep. I wake up and realize that, while I was sleeping, I was saying: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner," or "Glory to You, O God," or the words of some other prayer.

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[15] See above, chap. 6, n. 14.

Later on, this experience may become our permanent reality, but for the moment we are so taken up with God's presence, His activity, and His grace, that it becomes the constant center of our attention, something which completely preoccupies us. In this way, absolutely nothing intrudes or intervenes between you and God. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you feel as if you are alone with Him. And are you? Of course you are! Because God is always with us. This is the unique characteristic of spiritual marriage: that the one and only Bridegroom is always with us.[16] The important thing, then, is that God is with you, and nothing should be allowed to come between the two of you. Let's suppose, for example, that somebody does something that annoys me, or makes me angry, and now I'm upset. When that happens, my feelings come between me and that person. And this means that I haven't experienced anything of what we've been saying.

IV

When Christ becomes my sole companion in terms of my intention, feeling, and knowledge; when I'm involved with Christ to the extent that nothing distracts me from Him or makes me lose sight of Him, then I begin to experience something else.

Until this point, I've experienced Christ bounding into my existence. Now, however, I feel my innermost self being ravished during prayer. This is something that we experience quite often. It happens to all souls who love Christ, who want to experience Him. But when it happens, such souls can become upset and troubled, and ask themselves: "Is this something bad? Am I losing my mind? Is this perhaps something demonic, or caused by this, or because of that?" But it is none of these things. We should give thanks to God, Who has granted us to reach this initial stage of the spiritual life.

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[16] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Exposition on Psalm 5*: "The love of an earthly bridegroom for his spouse begins to fade over time, but the love of Christ, our heavenly Bridegroom, not only never fades, but continues to deepen and grow in intensity. And it is precisely because His desire for us is always increasing that John calls Him *the* Bridegroom (Jn 3.29)" (PG 55:62D-63A).

So I feel that, from time to time, my innermost self, my inner being, is caught up in prayer. Apart from any voluntary or conscious effort on my part, my intellect begins to pray to God on its own. I might be walking somewhere, in the midst of a conversation, or driving in a car, and I realize that, within me, my intellect has been caught up, and is saying: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

At moments like this, the intellect has been seized by God, but then returns to its immediate circumstances and environment. Again it's taken up, and again it returns to its place, time and again. It's like tossing a ball that bounces right back at you. That's what you feel when your intellect is saying the Jesus Prayer: you are caught up in the joy of a sacred game played with Christ. And these are the most joyful and delightful moments that we can experience: the ravishment of the mind during prayer.

There's another kind of ravishment as well, but we're not going to speak about that right now. The ravishment that we're talking about now is something that happens without my knowledge, although it is grounded in my innermost attitude of will. It's something that I experience as a kind of departure or egress of my self both from my self and from the whole universe. And all of this happens in virtue of the words: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me the sinner."

It is, then, an attraction exercised on me by Christ, which enraptures the inner person during prayer. When this happens, I feel myself subject to a kind of double experience: I am both caught up to Christ and yet at the same time remain within myself, because this kind of ravishment is also a recollection, a remembrance of Christ — something that can only take place when I remain within myself — but, at the same time, it is union with Christ and thus a living experience of Him.

Gradually, however, as time goes by, this rapture of the inner person occurs more frequently, until there comes a point when it occurs *without ceasing* (cf. 1 Th 5.17). The person who arrives at such a state will increasingly want to leave the world as much as possible, and to have as little to do with it as he can. At the same time, however, he becomes more pliant, obedient, and sociable, because his encounter with Christ is simultaneously an encounter with his own nothingness, and this fills him with holy fear, and makes him say to himself: "Who am I, that I should meet Christ, and speak with Him?" And thus he lives in the fear that perhaps one day he *will* meet Him. Whereas before he said, "I want to see God," and expected to see Him more or less right away, now he thinks differently, because he knows he'll be ravished away, consumed by fire; he knows that *no one shall see God's face and live* (cf. Ex 33.20).

This fear, this inner resistance to the vision of God, is itself an experience of God, brought about through the constant remembrance of Him. And because the *memory* of God is God's *presence* within us,[17] it takes us beyond place and time, and we become like someone who hears nothing, sees nothing, and whose mind has transcended every thought and all knowledge.

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[17] See St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 51: "Such is the man who carries in his soul the continuous memory of God. As Saint Basils says, 'Undistracted prayer is that

V

I'm often struck by the fact that women have such good memories for dates, events, and so forth, down to the smallest details. It's truly amazing! At the same time, however, this can be a disadvantage when they endeavor to approach God. The memory of their involvements in the world often makes it hard for them to become involved with God. Instead of consigning the world to oblivion, they recall and remember everything about it. Such minds are like labyrinths, whose halls are jammed with all sorts of things, useful and useless. In such a place, one can easily get lost.

But when a nun is joined to Christ, and begins to experience the kinds of things we've been discussing, she will of necessity remove from her memory all that is unnecessary, and, as she does, her consciousness will increasingly change, so that even her experience of time and space will be different. Passing beyond those narrow boundaries, such a soul expands — in delectation and in sweetness — toward the infinite.

What do we mean by this? Simply that you no longer remain within yourself as before, because your spirit goes out towards the infinite. But this is not a movement across an endless extension of time or space, but rather an entry into the kingdom of heaven, which does not belong to space or time, neither does it undergo alteration, for it knows no *variation or shadow due to change* (Jas 1.17). In order to enter it, you have to cross over into a different environment: the eternal kingdom of the immutable God.

After the experience of inner ravishment, then, we undergo a

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which produces in the soul a distinct reflection on God. And God's indwelling is this: to have God established in us by unceasing memory of Him' [*Letter* 2]. In this manner we become temples of God" (*Homilies*, 248).

movement into infinity, impelled by the sweetness of God. We sense that we're growing, expanding, in mind, heart, and spirit — essentially through the ruling element of the intellect — as if we were opening up and crossing the threshold into the light of the kingdom of the heavens. At this stage our thoughts are entirely removed from all that is earthly and changeable; memories of other times and places, of other loves and desires, along with everything else, vanish like darkness with the rising of the sun. In the words of the Apostle Paul, *we forget about what lies behind, and extend ourselves forward to what lies ahead* (Phil 3.13).

When we begin to experience these expansions of our being, these *extensions forward*, we become aware of our own, relative infinity. How, we wonder, does this expansion come about, this movement from one place to another? How does it happen that we're both walking on earth and living in heaven? How is it that we can go about our daily tasks and at the same time be locked in the boundless embrace of Christ? I don't understand this.

I discover, however, that this is another experience; not so much something I know, but something that I live. I had conceived of the spiritual life as something limited, as if I were standing in the middle of a circle whose circumference I could grasp. But now I begin to be aware of my spiritual *hypostasis*, the spiritual element within me that can be united to God: this is the very *breath of life* placed within me by God (cf. Gen 2.7).[18] I begin to get to know my deeper being, which is still in sin, but which is expanding toward God.

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[18] On this meaning of the word *hypostasis*, see above, chap. 5, n. 9. Here, the "spiritual hypostasis" is identified with the "divine breath" in Gen. 2.7, on which see St. Theoleptos of Philadelphia, *On Watchfulness and Prayer* 3: "On the sixth day, in the physical world, God created man, and in the intelligible world of the

I now have some degree of self-knowledge, some sense of who I truly am. I realize that within me there is a divine element, which broadens and expands like a cloud in the upper atmosphere. At the same time, however, I am confronted with the truth about my life, and I recognize that I am dust. As I cross into the realm of infinite spirit, I catch a glimpse of myself from the perspective of eternity. I see my sin, my selfishness, my passions, my pettiness, my mortality. I weep over all of this, but I also rejoice in the knowledge that my real, deepest self, the *breath* that God once *breathed upon* me (cf. Gen 2.7), will remain with me always, and that God is able to draw it back to Himself at any moment He pleases.

In this way, I come to experience myself as something strange, different, and new. I experience both my spiritual existence and my sinful self, which nevertheless loves God. And through these ravishments and ecstasies, these experiences of God's absence and presence, through the manifestation of my spiritual being, we begin to understand who we are.

Who are we? Ultimately we are what God has created, and not what sin has made of us. We belong to God, but nevertheless we bear the marks of what Satan did to us in paradise, with the cooperation of our own will. Thus both the divine and the demonic can be seen in one and the same person, and yet they are separate, because they're two different things, even though they coexist. To-

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mind, He created the heavenly-minded man with an affinity for intelligible realities. Therefore when the soul flees the sensations of the body and turns toward the knowledge of intelligible realities, God *gathers up* the *intellect* from its activities relative to sense perception, as if He were *gathering up dust from the ground* (Gen 2.6), and *breathes into it* the contemplation of Himself, along with the invocation of His glorious Name, and thereby makes the inner man a *living soul* (Gen 2.7)" (Gregoropoulos, 2:200-201); cf. below, chap. 10, n. 8.

gether reside also the old and the new, the earthly and the heavenly, because we are a combination of dust and the exhalation of the divine breath. The latter seems strange and alien to me, because until now I did not know about it. But it's also me, because it's been with me from the moment that God the Father breathed into me, and thus it is a part of me, my deepest being.

If we previously experienced God as strange and alien, now it's everything else that seems alien to us. We no longer know what to do: should we eat our fill, drink till we're drunk, weep, suffer, or be crucified and die? Should we flee? Where would we go? How, on the other hand, can this spiritual state become something permanent, something definitive in our life? And if it were to become definitive, it would frighten us, through the *abundance of visions and revelations* (cf. 2 Cor 12.1, 7). So what will happen now?

What should I do, when confronted with this menacing situation? Where should I go? It's as if you've climbed to a great height, and you say: "I hope I don't fall." In this situation you say something similar. You realize now that you're moving upward, climbing swiftly on a trail to heaven. Your spirit rides the heavens, as if it had mounted a noble steed. You now understand what it means when it says: *You have made him a little lower than the angels* (Ps 8.6). God has in fact made man superior to the angels, to the heavens, and to all things, placing him just *a little lower* than that one unique *Angel of Great Counsel,* Jesus Christ (cf. Is 9.6). And thus you gain a sense of your royal lineage, of the *authority* given to you in paradise, where you had *dominion over all creatures,* and the power to *give them all names* (cf. Gen 2.26, 20).

You're riding on the heights of the heavens, and everything is yours. All things fill you with delight, and you rejoice in them. What you're experiencing is both within and beyond your ability to understand. It's within your understanding, because God has counted you worthy to regain your kingdom, to re-assume your royal office, to re-acquire your authority and dominion. But it's also beyond your understanding, because you sense that this is not something that belongs to the world you inhabit, to your ordinary, daily life. You had to leave that world behind in order to see all this clearly, without the *eyes of the flesh* (cf. 1 Jn 2.16), without *mirrors and riddles* (1 Cor 13.12), without *veils and coverings* (cf. 2 Cor 3.17), but rather *face to face* (cf. 1 Cor 13.12).

Yet you feel your life is being governed by your spirit, which in turn has been taken up by the Holy Spirit, Who governs all creation. And in the face of this Spirit, you are lost, you are nothing, or rather, you're within Him, *for your life is hidden within His life* (cf. Col 3.3). I can't begin to understand this Spirit yet. Nevertheless, I partake of His life, I rejoice in Him, I recognize Him — it was for Him that I was born — even though He is still something unknown to me.

Thus we discover the Spirit, although His presence remains elusive, mysterious. The Spirit reveals Christ to us, but who can understand the revelation of the Spirit? *For He does not speak concerning Himself* (Jn 16.13).[19] To the extent that He is mine, and to the extent that my life has been taken up into His, I understand Him. But, at the same time, He is beyond my understanding, because He *moves above all creation* (cf. Gen 1.2). The Holy Spirit is the "giver of life," as we say in the Creed; He is the *creator of life itself,* and bestows existence and "spirituality" on all things (cf. Jn 6.63; 2 Cor 3.6). As a result, the heavens upon which I am riding, the world within which I am moving, is not simply the world of created things, but a universe of spiritual realities, because it belongs to the Holy Spirit.

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[19] The Spirit does not reveal Himself, but Christ: in a kenotic, self-effacing movement, the Spirit "conforms" the faithful to the "form" of Christ (cf. Rom 8.10; Phil 3.10, 21), making them "sons" and "co-heirs" with Christ (Rom 8.17). According to St. Athanasios (*First Letter to Serapion* 23), the Holy Spirit is the "seal" by which the character of Christ is impressed on creation: "If, then, the Spirit is the 'chrism' and the 'seal,' by means of which the Word anoints and seals all things, what likeness or identity does the chrism or the seal have with the things that are anointed and sealed? Moreover, the chrism bears the fragrance, not of itself, but of Christ the Anointer, which is why the anointed say, *we bear the good*

When I'm living within this tension — within this joy, this inebriation, in this incomprehensible comprehension of the Spirit — I feel as if I'm being comprehended, besieged, taken captive, as if I'm no longer able to exercise authority over myself. I'm lost, bound, surrounded on all sides by infinity. And whereas before I was conscious of the experience of my royal identity, now I experience my finitude, my smallness, my nothingness. And so I return to the present, realizing that I am a prisoner of God.

After this, how can I possibly say that there is no God? How can I tell God to "go away"? How can I sin, being conscious of His presence, after having tasted these things, and realizing the extent to which I am His prisoner? I could collapse, I could die, I could flee.

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fragrance of Christ (2 Cor 2.15). And the seal does not leave the impression of itself as such, but rather the form of Christ, in which the sealed participate, and to which they are *conformed,* as the Apostle says: *My little children, with whom I am in travail until Christ be formed within you* (Gal 4.19) (PG 26:583A; cf. 629A). For St. Basil (*On the Holy Spirit* 64), the Holy Spirit is the (self-effacing, yet ever-present and enabling) "light" that renders the Son visible: "Light cannot be separated from what it makes visible, and, unless the Spirit enlightens you, it is impossible for you to recognize Christ, the *image of the invisible God* (Col 1.15)" (Anderson, 97). See also below, chap. 8, n. 8.

But to where? Wherever I went, I'd still be encircled by heaven, by the spiritual world which God made (cf. Ps 138.7). I am the perfect prisoner. I am completely captive to the God Who *took captivity captive* (Ps 67.19), a captivity which previously I could not have even imagined or understood. Now, however, it's something that is mine, something that I experience, that I live. It's something that has happened to me, which has besieged me: a new world in which I now find myself.

You are a prisoner of God's grace. That's the sort of thing you experience now: your weakness, your incapacity, your inability. All you can do is ask for God's mercy.

VI

When I first realize that I am God's prisoner, that I am captive within His infinity, I become deeply aware of my weakness, and this is a feeling that takes me by surprise. Gradually, though, I grow accustomed to it. It's like finding yourself in a small, enclosed space. At first you're at a loss, and then you remember that you haven't been feeling well, and that you've been placed there to rest. So you relax, and sleep peacefully. Then a shaft of light enters, and you see an icon on the wall: an image of Christ in glory. You see Christ. You realize that He's in there with you as well. "Glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ," you say. In the same way, we gradually become accustomed to, familiar with, the infinity in which we are paradoxically confined.

Slowly I begin to sense that I am speaking with God, with the Spirit of God. I begin to realize that I'm not imprisoned at all, but rather that Christ has set me free. He is the One Whom I have loved: it is Him that I have sought, and so it is to Him that I am speaking. He is the One to Whom I address myself, as if He were sitting opposite me, and at the same time closer to me than my own self. He is the awesome creator of the universe, and with one glance could *cast me into the outer darkness* (cf. Mt 22.13). But He is also the One I love, and thus accompanies me on my way, and deigns to speak to me. It was by Him and for His sake that I was created, because *from Him and through Him and to Him are all things* (Rom 11.36).

This is the way in which I discover God. This is the way I discover Christ incarnate. I discover Him Who once took on my flesh, and, once I've grown accustomed to Him, I can address myself to Him directly, and then, walking beside Him, I can speak to Him and He to me. Thus we experience two things: that God is both in the world and within me. I recognize my relation to God along with His presence within me. I recognize the uncreated creator of the world, Who accepted to be born within creation; I recognize the One without beginning, Who deigned to accept a new beginning of life in human flesh. I recognize my judge, my Lord, but I also recognize Him who leads my heart wherever He wills, sets my thoughts in motion, and holds all things in the palm of His hand. I realize just how much my life is bound up with His. And thus I speak to Him, with Him, and in Him, offering my words to the Word: and all of this for me is the revelation of a single paradise.

Looking back, we can see that, from the very beginning, we had already begun to acquire spiritual knowledge: knowledge of paradise, and knowledge about myself; knowledge about angels, about God, about the Holy Trinity; knowledge of the heart, knowledge of things previously unknown, and, not least, knowledge of the Scriptures. So much so that now when I read something in Scripture, it seems that I've already read it twenty times, even though it may be the first time I've ever read it (although there should not be a single passage in the Bible with which the monk or nun is unfamiliar). And this knowledge seems to me to be perfectly natural, even though it's a knowledge that I have acquired.

Such knowledge is acquired both by my own labors and as the result of divine intervention in my life. Through my studies, my questioning, my obedience, my asceticism, my fasting – fasting is of great importance in this regard – but above all through God's direct interventions.

Gradually, however, this knowledge that I have acquired, which initially gave me a feeling of joy or even a certain sense of pride, increasingly appears to me to be something that is childish, infantile (cf. 1 Cor 13.11). Now I begin to acquire, not knowledge about different things, but knowledge of God Himself. We spoke about this earlier, but now we're using language that's simpler and more easily understood.

This knowledge of God comes from talking directly to and with Christ. Christ speaks to us, and tells us about Himself, about His Father. Then we begin to understand what the Holy Trinity means, because we have entered into the life of the Trinity. It's one thing to read books and study, for instance, the physical components of a cloud, and something else entirely to enter into a cloud, and experience it from within. The latter is knowledge that is direct, immediate, personal, and internal. And God is so kind in granting me this knowledge. He is so good that He treats me as if I'd never sinned, as if I'd never caused Him distress, as if I weren't a mortal, a mere *worm* (cf. Ps 22.6). Indeed He keeps me close beside Him, embraces me, adopts me as His own, treats me like His most precious child, and thus I live the life of His love. He opens my eyes, and enables me to see Him, and, when I do, so much is revealed.

Thus I have different forms of knowledge, many "knowledges," we might say, but at one point they all become one, and that single, uniform knowledge becomes the focal point of divine revelations. And these revelations of God become new certitudes, new insights into our life. By this I mean that I am full of divine revelations, which intensely animate my life. So much so that I myself become a revelatory sign, a person who radiates God, who transmits God, Whom I've acquired and absorbed, just as He has acquired me.

All of this, you understand, occurs only through the grace and power of God.

* * *

SECOND ASSEMBLY*

Up to a certain point, our salvation depends on us. It's up to us to say "yes" to Christ, so that He will have the right to enter into our lives and bring about our resurrection. We said that the soul, in struggling to seize God, is victorious only to the extent that it is seized and taken captive by Christ. And this is why God came to earth: to capture our souls and take them back to heaven. *Therefore it is said, "When He ascended on high, He led a host of captives"* (cf. Eph 4.8; Ps 67.19). And this is an experience repeated in the life of every soul that says "yes" to Christ.

But because man has been given the gift of freedom, he must repeatedly affirm and provide proof of his complete and voluntary bondage to Christ. God will not agree to take captive a heart that has not suffered, wept, and been broken. He seeks only *the heart that is broken and humbled* (Ps 50.17), for such a heart shows that it lives for nothing else but divine captivity.

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* 13 May, 1978.

You understand now that this is the eternal marriage, by means of which the soul is wedded to God. This is the fulfillment of the pledge that we made at our tonsure and even earlier at our baptism.

When we renounce our passions and reject our former interests and concerns, then God can bestow upon us His grace and power. And with the grace of God, we can do *all things* (cf. Mt 19.26). It is by God's power alone that we work miracles: and what is our salvation from a world of lost souls if not a miracle of divine power?

From the moment we give God the right to enter our life, His grace and power begin to operate, granting us divine knowledge grounded in experience. Not that God's grace was ever absent: it has been with us since baptism, but it was active in proportion to our voluntary death, to our spiritual labors, and to the extent that we're prepared to accept God.

At the same time, however, we also begin to perceive the activities of demonic powers. We begin to understand what St. Paul calls the *wiles of the devil*, we begin to see his *grasp on the world* (Eph 6.11-12), and thus we are enabled to escape his clutches. Having done so, we can say that Hades *has been stripped of his spoils* (cf. Lk 11.22); that the evil one has been vanquished, and all of this has taken place within us. And so we sing praises to the Risen Christ.

Having voluntarily emptied ourselves (cf. Phil 2.7), we need to demonstrate our desire, our longing, if we wish to enter the place of God's grace and power. The first thing that God asks of us is that we should manifest our desire *through all prayer* (Eph 6.18). This does not mean that we should make use of an endless variety of different prayers, because that would be something earthly. Instead, it means that, in the end, our entire life should become a prayer, so that we "breathe Christ always."[20]

Prayer is the most divine element that exists within man. It transports us to God, and is the means by which we are bound to Him. Through prayer, the communion of the Persons of the Holy Trinity is made available to us, and becomes the form of our own communication with God. Thus it is not a question of reciting this or that prayer, but rather that everything within us should *become* a prayer, that we should be praying in everything, *through all prayer.*

Prayer, as you realize, is the assimilation of the intellect to God, the transformation of the intellect into God's *chariot* (cf. Ps 67.17; Ezek 23.24). Prayer is like a weakness: the complete and utter inability of the intellect to live apart from God (cf. 2 Col 12.9). Prayer is the mode of the intellect when it has been seized and united to God. And woe to us if we are so earthly as to have to "decide" to pray, to decide when to "begin" to pray; or if we have to assume a particular posture or position for prayer, or if we have to "say" our morning, afternoon, evening, and night-time prayers, or especially if we have to impose this "have to" on the life of prayer. In such cases, prayer remains a remote ideal, a rote activity, and not our true and primary vocation. Just as it is the proper function of my eyes to see, of my hands to feel, of my mouth to speak and sing to the Lord, so too the proper and primary purpose of the intellect is to pray.

But there is more, for St. Paul does not simply say *through all*

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[20] The quotation is from the teaching of St. Antony the Great, as recorded by St. Athanasios, *The Life of St. Antony* 91.1 (Vivian and Athanassakis, 251, translate the phrase as: "Draw inspiration from Christ," but concede [n. 504] that the Greek [*anapneete*] "literally means: *breathe in,*" cf. Meyer, 95: "Let Christ be your life's breath").

prayer, but *through all prayer and supplication* (Eph 6.18). I make supplication to someone when I feel a deep need, when I feel that I am deprived, naked, persecuted, wounded, stripped of everything, it is then that I turn to someone and seek help, assistance, and refuge.

Thus, *through all supplication* means that I have to recognize my utterly miserable condition, my state of hopeless, inner disarray; that I feel naked of God's grace and deprived of His power; that I am not accomplishing *works of power* (cf. Gal 3.5; Eph 3.7), because the grace of God does not find a place through which to enter into me and do what it wills. It wants to slap me, embrace me, blind me, destroy me: to do whatever it wants. But for that to happen, I have to become a perfect instrument in the hands of divine grace.

Once I've understood that I haven't abandoned myself to the grace and power of God; when I see that God is not directing my life, then my feeling of nakedness will become a heart-rending supplication, a lamentation to God. Then, when I've overcome my personal experience of the fall, my passions and my sin; when I've overcome my pain, my crying, my bitterness; when I've vanquished worry, anxiety and sorrow, then I can begin to weep, and beg God to loose the bonds that hold me back from His grace, to loose my bondage to the flesh, to the world, and to vanity. Then I can ask Him for the sword of grace (cf. Eph 6.17), to cut through the Gordian knot and deliver me from these earthly bonds, so that I can sprout wings and ascend into the heavens.[21]

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21. Compare St. Niketas Stethatos, *On the Inner Nature of Things* 49: "Once impregnated by fear, the soul becomes through repentance pregnant with the Logos of divine judgment: the birth-pangs of hell encompass it, heartfelt anguish and travail afflict it as it reflects on the retribution due for the evil it has done. Then, having through copious tears and labors gestated in the mind's womb the

I repeat: to weep and to beg *with all supplication*. Do you have the grace of God? Is God's grace active within you? Can it ask of you whatever it wants, and will you obey immediately? Or will it find a barricade, a negative response, a hard heart, a shameless will, a carnal creature incapable of uniting itself to God? Are you someone whom God is able to use to perform mighty signs in the world? Can He perform even a single, small sign within you? Is He free to enter and leave, or are the gates of my soul bolted a thousand times against the grace of God?

If I see that things are like this, then I'll weep, beg, mourn, and shed copious tears. And these tears will be luminous. They will be tears of fire. They will flood my being with the light and fire of the Holy Trinity.

So this is what we mean when we say *with all supplication*. This is the only reason that anyone is allowed to weep and mourn. Not because I've sinned, because that kind of sorrow usually stems from our wounded pride. Not because I've been through this or that crisis, or because people have mistreated me, or done this or that to me. No. But when I've overcome the passions and reached a state of dispassion, *then* I can weep, and the tears that fall from my eyes will be divine. This is how I can seek the grace and power of God.[22]

Spirit of salvation it has conceived, it brings it forth into the world of the heart. Thus liberated from the pangs of hell and the anguish of judgment, the soul is joyously filled with longing for the blessings in store for it; purity and chasteness attend on it and, spurred by intense desire, unite it with God. Through this union it experiences an ineffable delight and sheds the sweet tears of compunction" (*Philokalia*, 4:120).

[22] Compare St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 37: "There are tears that burn and there are tears that anoint as if with oil. All tears that flow out of contrition and anguish of heart on account of sins dry up and burn the body, and often even the gov-

We can also seek God's grace and power by means of fasting. Remember the story in the Gospels, where Christ tells his disciples that *this kind does not go forth except through prayer and fasting* (cf. Mt 17.21; Mk 9.29). One interpretation of this passage is provided directly by the event which provoked it: *this kind* of demon *does not go forth*, does not depart from the soul, until the person concerned is continuously praying and fasting.

But there is another interpretation, of greater weight and depth, which understands the phrase "go forth" to mean "reaching one's destination," or "attaining one's goal." Man, who came forth from God, is not able to "go forth" to God, not able to return to the place he belongs, his place of origin. We can't get back to the place we started from. *This kind does not go forth*, does not return to God, *except through prayer and fasting*. This means that God is revealed to those who pray, supplicate, and fast.

Fasting is a concrete, visible sign that separates us from all that is earthly, fallen, and demonic. Any slackening of the conscience, however slight, with respect to fasting, introduces an unhealthy relaxation into our entire being — body and soul — so that God is not able to speak to the heart of a person who does not fast.

Fasting drives away demons. Fasting attracts the angels. Fasting makes the material spiritual. It is the beauty and adornment of the human race, and shines forth in the soul, the body, the face,

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erning faculty feels the injury caused by their outflow. At first a man must necessarily come to this order of tears and through them a door is opened unto him to enter into a second order, which is superior to the first; this is the realm wherein a man receives mercy. These are the tears that are shed because of insight; they make the body comely and anoint it as if with oil, and they pour forth by themselves without compulsion" (*Homilies*, 174-175).

in the whole of the human person, in whom God has been well pleased to dwell.

But fasting also requires complete attention and focus, for it places us in a state of heightened expectation. It means that now I live waiting for God, expecting Him in earnest, with patience, through all afflictions, with an empty stomach, an empty intellect, and an empty heart, knowing that they will all be filled by God.

Persevering in fellowship and the breaking of bread (Acts 2.42) is how the first faithful lived. And in so doing, they sought nothing other than Christ. It follows, then, that something similar has to happen to us, in order for us to be able to fast and pray. My eyes must learn to seek only Christ. I must learn to live only for Him. Through *fasting*, I invite God to enter my heart, and to grant it what it wishes. Through *prayer* and *supplication*, through *fasting* and *perseverance*, we are able to ask God for His grace, which, through faith, enables us to enter the Holy of Holies.

Faith is essential. All things will be given to us: God, heaven, salvation, love, freedom from the passions, fasting, supplication, certitude – everything – provided we have faith. However, that which we lack is precisely faith, not in the existence of God, but in the fact that He can do anything and does indeed do everything.

We have faith that the doctor or the dentist will do what's expected of them, we have faith in the butcher and the baker, but we lack a similar faith in God. We pray, but we don't expect God to answer. We seek after God, but we don't expect Him to appear to us. We do it only because we're supposed to. We speak to God, but not in the hope that one day we'll see Him. We ask God for gifts, for *our daily bread* (Mt 6.11), but we don't believe that He'll give us everything else besides.

But if we have faith that God is able to do anything, that He is the source of all possibilities, the answer to all questions, the inexhaustible treasury of all blessings, of all recompense, then, by becoming his sons and daughters, we come to possess all that He has.

What does Christ say to his disciples? *You are my friends* (Jn 15.14), as if He's saying: "You are My children, because to you I have revealed all knowledge, I've told you all My secrets; I've made you Mine, and given you My inheritance: we are now *co-heirs* (cf. Rom 8.17). What's Mine has become yours, belonging to each of you and all of you."

If we could understand this, even for a moment, then the entire meaning of our lives would change. Whatever road we might happen to be on, our course would immediately change, all *our paths would be made straight* (cf. Lk 3.4; Is 40.3), and lead directly to heaven, directly to God.

Let us make ourselves attractive to Christ by ceasing to live as we have done up till now. In other words: let us repent. And from now on, let us accept the promise of the Spirit, Who tells us that everything God has is ours.

The first feast of the Jewish year was dedicated to the celebration of a great mission. It was the tenth day of the seventh month, the beginning of the civil year, or what we would call New Year. This day was set aside for the atonement of the sins of the people (cf. Lev 16, 23, 26-32; Num 29.7-11). This was the day when the High Priest had the right to enter the Holy of Holies and offer atonement for the Jewish people. This was the day when God addressed the sons of Israel and said: *Today of all days, humble your souls and do no servile work. Devote yourself exclusively to the humbling of your souls* (cf. Lev 16.29-32). This means: do no work that is dictated by the sinful impulses and desires of your heart. Do nothing that demands your attention, or that absorbs your time and interests. *Do no servile work*, that is, no work that serves your own interests. Absolutely nothing. Because by leaving such work aside, you can concentrate on what's important: entering into the way of the Lord.

Humble your souls: Have contrite hearts, recognize your sorry state, your sinfulness, and acknowledge the vanity of your ways. Allow yourself to be sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice at the hands of the High Priest; agree to place your sins on the scapegoat (cf. Lev 16.20-22), and so be reconciled with God.

This was the work appointed by the Jewish law for the New Year. It was the way that a new beginning was made, every year. And we too, my children, can make a new beginning, can live our own new day of humbleness, can bow our heads and be *sprinkled with the hyssop* of divine grace (cf. Ps 50.9). We can let the rod of the Word strike and humble our souls, which are wounded and scarred by sin, and we will find rest, comfort, and peace (cf. Ps 22.5). Our hardness of heart will melt away, as we become true children of God.

Humble your souls! If we wish, every day can be for us the "tenth day of the seventh month," a day of humility and atonement. And when we feel the weight of our sins, and recognize that our days pass by in wretchedness and futility, we can place ourselves under the stole of our spiritual father, and say: "Father, cover me with your stole, which is the visible sign of God's invisible grace. Do this so that God will accept my humbled heart, for I have sinned against Him." When you do this, you show that you have renounced everything that you had previously defended, and which you had clung to as your own.

When we humble ourselves before God, when we soften our hearts before Him, we know that He will not disappoint the *in-*

tention of our heart (Acts 11.23). Let the whole intention of your heart, the whole purpose of your life be to become one with God. Then the fire that we were talking about will come, and the deluge, for *God dwells in the flood* (Ps 28.10), and we dwell in God.

8. ON SPIRITUAL REBIRTH*

"The Lord died for the sake of all, and now He calls all to life. And this life is a heavenly, spiritual rebirth, without which no soul can live, as the Lord Himself said: *Unless a man is born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God* (Jn 3.3)"

St. Makarios the Egyptian, *Homily* 30.3

FIRST ASSEMBLY

We have been reading from the *Spiritual Homilies* of St. Makarios the Egyptian, and reflecting on his doctrine of spiritual rebirth.[1] In one place, we read that Christ is like a painter, who *"depicts the image of the heavenly man in the hearts of those who look to him in faith."* In another place, we saw how this heavenly image is illumined by the divine energies, and we spoke about how the ineffable light of the Holy Spirit dwells within us, making God a tangible reality in our souls. We heard how *"the body receives life from the soul, and the soul receives life from the Spirit, so that the body lives through the soul, and the soul lives in God through the Spirit."* A person who is complete in this way is a *"bearer"* of the divine image, indeed a bearer of God Himself.

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* Delivered at the Holy Cenobium of the Annunciation, Ormylia, 4 May, 1979.

[1] St. Makarios the Egyptian (ca. 300-390) was the principal founder of monastic life in Sketis (Wadi Natrun, west of the Nile Delta). Among his many spiritual gifts were those of healing and prophecy. His *Fifty Spiritual Homilies* (which may have been partly compiled by his disciples) are among the classics of patristic and ascetic literature. Marked by striking imagery and forceful arguments, they are profoundly Biblical and at the same time highly creative. In general, the *Homilies* emphasize the fallen nature of man, the importance of the Holy Spirit, and the need for "experience" in the spiritual life. Under consideration in the chapter translated above is *Spiritual Homily* 30.7-9.

Thus a person *"acting under the influence of the heavenly fire"* — by which he means the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 3.11; Lk 3.16; Acts 2.3) — *"ceases to be led about by his passions and the demons."* In the same way that *"iron takes on all the qualities of fire, once it's been placed in a furnace, so too does man, under the power of the Holy Spirit, take on the qualities of God."*[2] Whenever the Holy Spirit takes *"man upon his wings, and elevates him above all things, nothing evil can lay hold of him; no demon, or evil thought, or temptation, or anything else at all, can draw near to him or touch him."*

In this way, the *"new Israel,"* consisting of these God-bearing souls, is *"far above the old Israel, whose footsteps were confined to the bottom of the sea and the river (cf. Ex 14.22; Josh 3.14-17). But being freed from the brine and brackishness of life, the true children of God walk above the sea of bitterness, through which glide evil powers."* And they are able to do this because *"both their souls and their bodies have become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit,"* and these three together make a complete human being.

Let us now continue with our reading of the text:

"On the day that Adam fell, God appeared, walking in paradise (Gen 3.8), and when He saw Adam, He wept, and said: 'What is this that I see? I created you in My image, placed you in paradise, and

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[2] The effects of fire on iron as a figure illustrating the union of divine and human natures in Christ, was first used by Origen, *On First Principles* 2.6.6 (Butterworth, 113); and other writers such as St. Cyril of Alexandria, *That Christ is One* (SC 97:506); St. John of Damascus, *Against the Jacobites* 52 (Kotter 4:127); and the author of a Nativity sermon ascribed to St. Basil (PG 31:1460C). In St. Makarios, the analogy is applied to the effect of the "fire" of the Spirit on the human soul.

gave you every blessing; what, then, is this evil thing you have chosen?'" The fall of Adam, the first human being, causes God to weep. Of course we know that God does not weep: this is a human, anthropomorphic way of expressing God's concern for fallen man, the creation of His hands. The same is true concerning God's initial surprise and subsequent question: *"What is this strange thing I see? What is this evil thing you have chosen?"* As if to say: "Where on earth did you find such a thing, and why did you choose to make it your own? I *placed you in paradise* (Gen 2.8), where evil did not exist. Everything was *exceedingly good* (Gen 1.31). How then, could this have happened? It seems impossible, absurd. It's as if I said to you: 'Here are pure, angelic souls: choose one for a companion,' and you stretch forth your hand and select a foul demon'." And so God weeps. He is at a loss to understand what happened. With tears in His eyes, He looks upon Adam and wonders aloud: *"From what glory have you fallen, and with what shame have you clothed yourself?* The leaves that cover you now, and the coats of skin you'll put on later (cf. Gen 3.7, 21), are these not the symbols of your shame?" Indeed, they represent the fall itself, and the garment of sin in which Adam clothed himself.[3]

"I raised you up to great glory, I made you a son of God, I made you the king of creation, I made you a perfect creature in order for you to become a perfect god. How was it, then, that you were able to turn away from the gift of glory, choosing instead to purchase disgrace? How were you able to clothe yourself in the vile garments of shame? I created you as a being of pure light, and now you are all darkness! I, God, your creator, am Light; My essence is light, My energy is light, and in My light I bathed and clothed you, *what, then, is this darkness that now enshrouds you?"*

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[3] For a study dealing with the "coats of skin," see Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, trans. Norman Russel (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 1997). See also above, chap. 1, n. 5.

What a terrible thing sin is! How unspeakably tragic is the fall of man! And the same thing happens to us when we *quench the* fire *of the Holy Spirit* (cf. 1 Thess 5.19); when we cease being bearers of the Spirit and are overtaken by the darkness of our passions, stumbling into the mud of corruption, and much else besides.

"When Adam fell into sin, he fell away from God and died spiritually." Do you understand what he's saying? The life of God is the life of the Holy Spirit within us. When Adam fell, he separated himself from the Spirit, and thereby lost God, and died a spiritual death.[4] The light drained from his body, and he was filled with darkness. He was suddenly deformed, disfigured, ugly, and vile. And thus God said to him: *Adam, where are you?* (Gen 3.9).

We can say that God's lament, His tears, and His anxiety over the fate of His missing son, are all things which, in a sense, happened *before* he put this question to Adam. They are events in the life of God that occur during God's search for fallen man. With the glorious *light* of His countenance, God searches the *house* of paradise *for the lost coin*, which bears His sovereign image (cf. Lk 15.8), and as He does so He cries out in hope: *Adam, where are you?* The response God was longing to hear was this: "Here I am, Father, waiting for You, because I have sinned; but I know that You are still my Maker and my God." But what did Adam say? *I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid, and so I hid myself. The woman whom You gave to be with me, she deceived me* (Gen 3.10, 12).

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[4] Compare St. Gregory Palamas, *To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia* 9: "As the separation of the soul from the body is the death of the body, so the separation of God from the soul is the death of the soul. And the death of the soul is the true death. This is made clear by the commandment given in paradise, when God said to Adam, *'On whatever day you eat from the forbidden tree you will certainly die'* (Gen 2.17). And it was indeed Adam's soul that died by becoming through his transgression separated from God; for bodily he continued to live after that time, even for nine hundred and thirty years (Gen 5.5)" (*Philokalia*, 4:296).

Do you understand what Adam is saying? "I am no longer looking for God, but only to justify myself." Instead of hearkening to God, Who had called out to him, Adam has turned inward, so that God becomes a frightening, external force: *I heard the sound of You, and I was afraid.* And what is he afraid of? He is afraid of the truth about himself, afraid that God will not accept his self-justifying explanation of what happened. And what explanation was this? That *God Himself* was to blame for what happened! Because that is what Adam meant when he said, "the woman whom *You* gave me, she deceived me, and thus this is all *Your* fault, God."[5]

And this is the appalling sin that we commit every day: we seek to justify ourselves before God and those around us. We are ready to blame God in order to *save our own life*, to preserve ourselves in our state of sin (Mt 16.25). But when David sinned, he said: *Against You only have I sinned, and done this evil before You, so that You may be justified in Your words, and prevail when You are judged* (Ps 50.6). But we do not care to see God, or anyone else, justified: only ourselves. Indeed nearly all that we say, think, and do, including our seemingly selfless "good deeds," are essentially attempts to justify ourselves, and thereby sustain our egos in their fallen condition. That's what Adam did, and that's what we do, as true children of our fallen father.

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[5] The Elder's interpretation of the fall and its immediate consequences closely follows St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 17 (FOTC 74:222-246). Compare St. Symeon the New Theologian, *First Ethical Discourse*: "God tries to bring him (i.e., Adam) to repentance by asking; 'And who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' But Adam will not admit that he has sinned. Instead, he tries to put the blame on God Who made all things 'very good,' and says; 'The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate' (Gen 3.11-12). And the woman in her turn ascribes blame to the serpent, and because both of them absolutely would not repent and fall down before their Master to ask His forgiveness, He removes them and throws them out of paradise, so that they must live afterwards on this earth as foreigners and exiles" (Golitzin, 1:27).

But once Adam had spoken in this way, there was no longer any possibility for communion between him and God. And that is also what has happened to us. Cut off from God, severed from the light, we are but miserable little creatures, crawling around on the earth like ants, stealing into the dark holes of our passions and petty self-interest, which are more suffocating than any ant-hole, which for the ants are palaces. And all of this has happened because, like Adam, we are infatuated with our selves and have no interest in looking to God.

And this happens every day. Suppose you have words with another nun, and after a few minutes, you learn that the elder wants to see you. Right away you think: "Hmm. She's told him we've had words. But I'll tell him what really happened!" At that moment, you fall away from God. You're thinking only about your self; you're concerned only to justify your actions, to preserve yourself in your state of sin. For you, God becomes whatever it is you're thinking about at that moment.

Suppose a farmer sees hail falling on his fields. Where will his thoughts be? On his fields. Or suppose a man who loves his wife sees a beautiful dress. Where will his thoughts go? To his wife, to give her a present. Every one thinks about that which is dear to him. In such moments, your true love is revealed, your treasure, your God (cf. Mt 6.21).

And so it was with Adam: "I'm over here, hiding, because I was afraid to see you, because I've sinned. I'm afraid that you wouldn't accept my excuses; that You'd say it was all my fault. I was afraid that you would no longer acknowledge me as Your child." To be sure, Adam's desire to justify himself, the various excuses he contemplated, were the signs of certain death. And this is why St. Makarios says: *"When Adam fell away from God, he died spiritually."* Seeking to justify himself, Adam condemned himself to life without God.

Until then, the damage wasn't fully done; the blow could have been blunted, the tragedy averted. This was the critical moment, which we all must face, when it becomes clear whether we'll choose God or our self. As a general rule, we choose our self. Every day we repeat the sin of Adam. He fell when he opened his soul to the poison of the serpent, but there was still hope that he might turn and embrace God. He could have raised his arms to God and cried: "God, I am your voice, your self-expression; I am your creation, your child, and I have sinned. Bend down and hold me; save me before I perish completely!" Instead, he said, in effect: "What do You want, God? Have you come here to judge me?"

St. Makarios says that *"Adam fell away from God"* to indicate that Adam himself chose sin; of his own volition he departed from God, the source of life. And when he did, death covered him like a shroud. At this, *"God wept, the angels wept, all the heavenly powers wept, and the earth and all its creatures lamented the death of Adam."* And as they wept, they said to him: "Adam, why were you thinking only of yourself, and not your Father? Why did you try to justify yourself? Why did you answer in the way that you did, instead of turning to God?"

After this, St. Makarios tells us that *"all creatures saw the king who had been given to them."* The sky, the earth, the animals, and all the angels and heavenly powers, had been placed under a king. Who? Man. Yes, man was made king even of the angelic powers, because whereas they are *ministering spirits, sent forth to serve* (Heb 1.14), man was created a king, *according to the image of God* (Gen 1.26).

"They saw the king who had been given to them become a slave of evil powers." He who had been given authority over all the angels, and was exalted over all heaven and earth, became the slave of a fallen angel. *"Then his soul was cloaked in darkness, bitter and evil, for he was now the slave of darkness. He was the man who 'fell among robbers' and was 'left for dead' on the road 'from Jerusalem to Jericho' (Lk 10.30-37)."* The man in the parable was Adam, although all of us, in our own way, retrace his steps, and fall victim to the same spiritual robbers.[6]

"And Lazarus, whom the Lord raised from the dead, is also a

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[6] See the sermon ascribed to St. Basil, *On the Passions* 9: "He (i.e., the devil) managed to drag man down from Jerusalem to Jericho: from the high place to the valley, because Jerusalem sits on a hilltop, whereas Jericho lies below the level of the Dead Sea. Leaving the security of Jerusalem, man fell among thieves, who wounded him and stripped him of his garments. First came the wound, then the stripping. The wound of the soul is sin. The stripping is the removal of the soul's garment of incorruption. And this happens because sin obliterates the grace given to us in Baptism. Thus fornication is a wound, as is adultery, and so is resentment and envy, and all other such things, which strike the soul like a band of robbers; these robbers are the demons, who, by exploiting our impulse to sin, attack and wound us. And after the wound comes the stripping. If we were speaking of bodily things, the stripping would *precede* the wound, but here the wound comes first, so that you might learn that sin precedes the loss of grace, which was given to us by the Lord" (PG 31:1456D-1457A).

symbol of Adam, for he was so rank with stench that no one could approach his tomb (cf. Jn 11.39). So when you hear of Lazarus, and of the man who fell among thieves, don't let your mind wander off to the mountains." That is, don't let your mind wander off to the hill country of Bethany, where Lazarus lived, or to the hills of Judea, or to paradise with Adam, for that would be a mistake. Instead, *"enter into your soul"* – enter into your true self – *"because you too bear these same wounds, and this stench, and this darkness. That which befell Adam has befallen all of us, for we are all his children."*

The sin of Adam has affected all mankind, and is beyond any human cure. This is why St. Makarios at this point quotes from the prophet Isaiah: *There is no soundness in them; but bruises and festering sores, which cannot be healed; it is not possible to apply a plaster, nor oil, nor bandages* (Is 1.6). And this is why David says: *There is no healing in my flesh* (Ps 37.4). "I look at my flesh," he says, "at my hands, my feet, my entire body, and all of it is sick; not a single part of me is healthy. And when I look at my soul, I see that it, too, is sick; black and blue with the bruises of sin. Then I look even deeper, to try and see the Holy Spirit, but my soul is empty, isolated, and dead."

Isaiah says: *There is no soundness in them, but bruises.* Not just a bruise here and there; not just a little black and blue; not merely one *festering sore*, but an endless sore, because the whole of me is a bruise, the whole of me is festering: I am a massive, bleeding wound. *It is not possible to apply plaster.* Of course not: if I were to apply something soothing, such as a bit of plaster, or some ointment, or a strip of bandage, where would I put it? Here? There? But I'm inflamed all over, festering through and through. In any case, no amount of oil would be sufficient, nor could I obtain the necessary number of bandages, *for we have been stricken with an incurable wound.*[7]

And let us ask ourselves this: how often do we realize that we're in such a wretched state? Do we understand that our wound is fatal, and that there is no remedy for it, no cure? Do we realize this? Do we think about this? How often? When? And even if we don't realize that *there is no healing in our flesh, no soundness,* at least we should know that, somewhere in our soul, there is a tiny wound, an imperfection. But we don't even believe that. And even if, from time to time, we shed a little tear, and say "forgive me, Lord, I'm a sinner," it's a lie, an out and out lie. Why? Because when we say such things, it's usually out of self-regard, or because our pride has been hurt, or our self-will frustrated, or because of some memory we're clinging to, or something we're after, or because of some failure we've experienced, or because of someone else's success. *That's* why we say we're sinners and shed a tear or two, and not because we're really thinking of God.

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[7] Compare St. Antony, *Letter* 2: "The prophets all saw that the wound was incurable and that none of the creatures was able to heal it, but only the Only-begotten, Who is the very Mind and Image of the Father, and Who made every rational creature in the image of His Image. Knowing that the Savior is a great physician, they all assembled and offered prayers for their members, that is, for us, crying out and saying: *Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? We would have healed her, but she is not healed: now therefore let us forsake her* (Jer 8.22 and 51.9)" (Rubenson, 204); id., *Letter* 3 (p. 207); id., *Letter* 6: "God, seeing this incurable wound, and seeing that it had become grave, visited them in His mercy, and after a time, He, in His benevolence, granted them the law through Moses. And Moses founded the house of truth and wanted to heal the great wound, but could not complete the building of the house. Then all the host of saints assembled in unity and prayed by the benevolence of God for our salvation, that He would come to us to save us all, He, who is the great and true high priest and true physician, Who is able to heal the great wound, *for being God, He took the form of a servant, and gave Himself for our sins, and our iniquities humbled Him and through His wounds we were all healed* (cf. Phil 2.6-7; Gal 1.4, and Is 53.5)" (p. 216; cf. p. 222); and id., *Letter* 7 (p. 227).

That's the kind of liars and hypocrites we are when we supposedly repent. And when we set out to mourn over our sins, or commit ourselves to some other such practice, it's nothing more than an effort to show God — as if He didn't know! — that we are mighty, spiritual warriors. "See, God, I even shed tears." And then a bit of squeezing around the eyes to get the tears rolling, just to be sure that God can see them.

For we have been stricken with an incurable wound of such proportions that *only the Lord is able to heal it.* With these words, St. Makarios is telling us that we, on our own, *can do nothing* (cf. Jn 15.5). God does everything. Your father, your mother, the abbess, they'll all give you a little money, tell you to go shopping, and prepare dinner. But God doesn't even ask you to do that much. He *brings* you the food, perfectly prepared, and says: "Keep the money." And not only that, but He'll even place it in your stomach, so you won't tire from chewing! That's how good God is!

Why, then, are you lacking in virtue? Why are you in the darkness, and not in the light? Why do you worry, and get sad and despair? Why do you care so much about your sin, your failure? What does it matter if you've got your health or not? What does it matter how people treat you? What does it matter if you're rich or poor? What significance do those things have? Why should you worry about any of them, when, right now, at this very moment, God Himself is standing before you?

"And this is why He Himself came: because none of the ancients, not the Law itself, nor any of the prophets, were able to bring heal-

ing. He alone, in virtue of becoming man, cured this incurable wound of the soul." If you think you can do anything about this wound, you're wrong. If you want to see what frauds we are, what hypocrites we are before God, examine yourself carefully when you fast, pray, keep vigil, and read your books; or when you perform some act of kindness, especially when you say "yes" to something which you really wanted to say "no" to. You feel as if you've achieved something, haven't you? And you expect something in return for it, don't you?

That's the way we are. Our aim is always to prove that we're somebody, or that we've achieved something which makes us better than everybody else. Do you see how sick we are? How deep the wound goes? *"None of the ancients, not the Law itself, nor any of the prophets"* could do a thing about it: but you, in your pride, are going to triumph, all by yourself. The truth, however, is that your heart, your mind, your wisdom, and all your virtue don't amount to the *husks that a pig eats* (cf. Lk 15.16). But if you could be free of all that — free from your self! — and allow God into your life just once, *that* would be something!

"Let us then welcome God the Lord, the true healer, Who alone is able to heal our souls, having labored greatly for us." He did all that was necessary in order to heal us, *tiring Himself out* (cf. Jn 4.6) as he descended into the grave, so that we might be freed from death and corruption. He suffered in order to free us from suffering; He died so that we might live; He redeemed us from our slavery so that He Himself could enter into our soul, and make it His dwelling.

Think of it: Jesus Christ, the Life of all, the Creator of the universe, the only One ever to have been born without sin, was all alone, left in a common grave, outside of Jerusalem. He was alone even among His closest friends, since they never really understood Him, and thus He asked them: *Do you not perceive or understand?* (Mk 8.17) *Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know Me?* (Jn 14.9). At the time of His passion, His isolation became acute. In the garden of agony, when His *sweat became like great drops of blood*, His disciples drifted off into sleep (Lk 22.44). One by one His friends deserted Him. He stood alone before the judgment seat of Pilate, alone on the cross, alone in the grave: everywhere alone. He went alone into Hell. Alone, always alone. Why? So that you might learn that you have to be alone with God in order to become His dwelling place.

Then the Lord will say, at the Last Judgment, to those on His left, whom He will send away into Gehenna, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels: "I was a stranger and you did not welcome me" (cf. Mt 25.33-41). Do you see? He's a stranger, somebody who's alone, who's ignored: *I was hungry and you gave me no food; I was alone in prison and you did not visit me* (cf. Mt 25.42-43).

God approaches Adam in order to embrace him, but Adam wants no part of Him. Instead, he wants life without God, and thus chooses to be alone. Adam's proud, assertive exterior, however, masks a terrible loneliness, which, if it could speak, would say: "I'm afraid, God. You stay over there. Don't come near me. Leave me here, where I've hidden myself. Don't even try to see me." And this is the fate of those who choose the self over God: utter isolation and loneliness. According to St. Makarios, those who choose anything but God, are choosing darkness over light. And it doesn't matter how seemingly small such a thing might be. It could be anything. For instance, if a negative thought enters your mind, you are, for that moment, alone in the darkness, overshadowed by that thought, and lost to God.

But Christ, the *stranger,* is also alone. He voluntarily takes on your loneliness; He enters into your isolation, in order to make you His dwelling place. And so he *stands and knocks on the door* of your isolated, hardened heart (cf. Rev 3.20). Like a *stranger,* he is seeking a place of *welcome* (Mt 25.41). And He does this because, as St. Makarios says, *"His food and drink, as well as his clothing, shelter, and rest, are in our souls."*

Christ was a stranger on the earth, *because even though the world was made through Him, the world knew Him not.* Indeed He was a stranger even among His own brethren, for *He came to his own home, and his own people received Him not* (Jn 1.11-12). But, as St. Makarios suggests, it is not simply in this sense that Christ agreed to become a stranger, but in the deeper sense that Christ has rejected all rights.

In one glance, the eyes of Christ can encompass the universe. In a single gesture, He can embrace and contain all things, both in heaven and on earth: His heavenly Father, the Holy Spirit, the angels, the stars, the planets, everything in an instant. But *He did not account equality with God a thing to be grasped at, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave,* a stranger (Phil 2.7). It's as if He said: "I refuse every place of rest other than your soul, so that you will know that I, Christ, *empty Myself* in order to be filled by you. Though you be *a worm and not a man* (Ps 21.6), I will honor you in this way, so that you can become My bride, My bridal chamber, My completion, My perfection. And though you are but a wretched earth-worm, I will make you the most beautiful thing there is: I will make you God. And because I am God, I lack nothing; I am in need of nothing. Whatever I have done, whatever I have become, has all been on account of you. My self-abasement, My exile, My hunger, My thirst, My loneliness, are things that I have voluntarily chosen and which can only be satisfied by you; for you are My food and My drink, and My clothing, shelter, and place of rest."

This is how far God has abased Himself! In order to fill us with His plenitude, He has voluntarily emptied Himself. This is what He means when He says: *I was a stranger, and I was hungry and thirsty*, and so on, namely: that He has rejected everything in order to embrace everything. He abandoned the *bosom of the Father* (cf. Jn 1.18) to make His home in our heart. *Though He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich* (2 Cor 8.9).

"Let us therefore," St. Makarios concludes, *"welcome Him into our hearts"* — and here he reverses what he has just said — *"for He is* our *food and drink and eternal life."* In reality, the stranger, the one who is hungry, thirsty, and locked in prison, is not Him at all. It's you. If you are everything to Him, then so must He be everything to you, for *without Him you can do nothing* (Jn 15.5). But He can be yours only if you become estranged to everything, especially to yourself: then He will be your food, and drink, and life eternal.

"And any soul that does not accept Him within itself, that does not accept to give Him a place of rest, will find no place in the kingdom of Heaven. But do you, Lord Jesus Christ, grant that we may enter Your kingdom, as we glorify Your name, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, unto ages of ages. Amen."

Have we welcomed Christ in our heart? Has He found a *place* within us *to rest His head* (Mt 8.20)? Do we know this feeling of repose? Why do we bar the door of our heart to Him? Why do we choose our selves over God? We do not, it seems, want God to be *justified in His words* (Ps 50.6), but rather we seek to justify only our selves, and not only in our words, but in our mind and heart.

SECOND ASSEMBLY*

God did not create man to be degraded by the passions and the pain and misery that have sprung up like *weeds in the field of* our weakened will (cf. Mt 13.25). We were not brought into the world to be deprived of God, but rather to become gods ourselves, to share in the perfection of the image of the Trinity. Man was created to become a *vessel* and *temple* of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 4.7; 1 Cor 6.19).

The last time we met, we saw that we need to undergo a spiritual rebirth, and that this rebirth – which means being filled with the life of the divinity – will constitute our entry into the kingdom of God. How does this birth come about?

God has ordered all things in a harmonious, unified fashion, and thus there exist certain analogies between the divine and the human. The image and likeness of a human father, for example, is passed on to his offspring by means of his seed. In similar fashion, God, who brings human beings to spiritual birth, bestows His image upon us through the power of His spiritual seed: the Holy Spirit.[8] And just as the body cannot live without the soul, the soul cannot live without being taken up and infused with life by the Holy Spirit.

Thus it is possible for a man to be physically alive, but spiritually dead. On the other hand, he may also be fully alive, physically and spiritually, being filled with life by the Holy Spirit, and so truly communicate with God. The Spirit, then, comes forth from ineffable light, like a ray of light *proceeding from the Father* (Jn 15.26), and enters into and illumines man's entire being, so that the whole man becomes like a light, illumined from all sides, within and without, being entirely whole and complete. Such a man, you will understand, has obtained rights with respect to God.

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* 10 May, 1979.

[8] See above, chap. 7, notes 19.

In a series of marvelous images, St. Makarios told us why Christ was born, lived on earth, suffered, died, was buried, and rose. Why? In order to *stand and knock at the door* of our heart (Rev 3.20). The fact that he *knocks* is a sign that He does nothing without our consent: He cannot enter unless I want Him to. Christ seeks us out and knocks on our door, waiting patiently outside, like a stranger seeking warmth and shelter. In so doing, He creates within us the sense and experience of His *kenosis*, His self-emptying (Phil 2.7).

Why does the God of the universe stand outside in the cold, day after day, knocking on our door? Because He can't do without us. Just as a married woman can't do without her husband, or a married man without his wife — because each partner is integral to the identity of the other — so too has Christ arranged things so that He can't do without us. Without us, He is naked, hungry, thirsty, and *has no place to rest His head* (Mt 8.20). He has made us His food and drink, His clothing and shelter: He has made our hearts His only place of repose. And when we open the door and welcome Him in, He fills us with His life and light. But make no mistake: without Him, we are dead; a dark, empty place, designating only His absence.

We can say, then, that until the Holy Spirit takes up residence in a person, he is a closed heart. And when a heart is closed, nothing can open it from the outside, since it is locked from within. A closed heart is closed in on itself, locked in the prison of its *cares and anxieties* (Mt 13.22).

Despite being filled with these things, such a heart is in fact empty, and thus it grumbles and growls like a starving stomach, riddled with ulcers through which its life is draining away. Filled with itself and yet utterly empty; closed off to God and yet torn open and bleeding, the heart of the self-immersed man is incapable of being present to God. Instead of turning to God and opening up to Him, we prefer to hide behind an empty mask. But to live without God is to live at odds with yourself, to tear yourself apart with your own hands, to gouge out your own eyes, to be infinitely divided, and thus forever at war.

Everything is in conflict: our thoughts, our desires, our experiences, the circumstances of our life. We become like a man who takes up a sword, cuts down everything around him, and, when he is done, breaks the sword into pieces and throws it away. That's what happens to our soul: it is divided into parts and dispersed. And though scattered like so much dust in a raging wind, it nevertheless remains alone, closed, and dark; unsettled and filled with fear, because it has enslaved itself to a dark, lonely power which knows no rest and no peace.

What does "loneliness" mean? It means that I don't experience the nearness and the existence of the other. Instead, I see him as an "other," as someone separate from and potentially hostile to me. From this internal isolation arises the division between "me" and "you," between my will and yours, between my desire and yours. And thus I question if this or that person actually loves me, cares about me, or thinks about me. What do such thoughts reveal? That I experience the other as a stranger, and this, in turn, reveals my estrangement from life, my self-incarceration, the frigidity of my being. And nothing can warm my frozen heart or break through its walls of ice, except the fire of the Holy Spirit, which melts, warms, and illumines everything in the innermost recesses of our being. The Spirit alone can *cast fire on the* frozen *earth* of my heart (cf. Lk 12.49), consuming and transforming all that is base and hateful within me.

Otherwise, I exist in fragments. My being is torn apart by internecine warfare.[9] And you can feel this conflict taking place within you, even though you may not fully understand why. Our divided selves contend one with the other; we consume and devour ourselves, being increasingly cut off from God and man. *But it is not good for man to be alone* (Gen 2.18). And this is why God created woman, so that man would not be turned in on himself, but turned toward her, and so remind them both of the union of the divine and the human, of the *great mystery of Christ and the Church* (Eph 5.32). Man cannot live alone. It is not possible.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him (Rev 3.20). Do you see? Before we can open the door, we have to hear the knocking; we have to hear the voice. It's as if we were startled by a sound that makes us turn from what we were doing, that tears us away from our loneliness and internal conflicts. When that happens, we make a beginning; we begin to make an opening.

Have you ever seen people when they open their hearts and talk to others, how much they change, how happy they become, how much hope they feel within them? And the other person doesn't have to say a word! I come to you and open my heart. I talk and talk, and you just smile, and nod your head in agreement with what I'm saying, without making a sound. And when I'm finished I say: "Thank you, it's been so good talking with you, I feel so much better now!" But the other person didn't say a word! Nothing at all! And yet, he said everything, exactly what I needed to hear, too, because that's what I experienced: I felt I was in communion with you. By opening up to you, I put you in my heart. Do you see? As soon as you open something, the light streams in. So the knocking on the door in fact marks the beginning of the opening, because it means that we've already interrupted our self-enclosed monologue long enough to hear the voice of the other. You can't be inside and outside at the same time. Either you talk to yourself, or you talk to somebody else.

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[9] See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*: "Recognizing Christ as *Peace* (Eph 2.14) means putting an end to the civil war within our self. Let us therefore reconcile the elements at variance within us, in order that the *flesh no longer lusts against the spirit* (cf. Gal 5.17; Rom 8.6, 7). Subjecting the spirit of the flesh to divine law, let us live peacefully, having been dissolved into the new and peaceful man, and having become one [person] from two. For the definition of peace is the harmony of the dissonant parts. Once the civil war in our nature is expelled, then, we also, being at peace within ourselves, become peace, and reveal our having taken on the name of Christ as true and authentic" (FOTC 58:102-103).

We have, then, the opening of the heart,[10] which is a human act, an act of the will. If we're living in a state of pain and anxiety, if we're experiencing the fall and curse of Adam, it's because we *choose* to do so. We like it. We find it satisfying, because it makes us feel self-sufficient. And it's a road that we're used to: selfishness, self-interest, self-assertion, self-sufficiency, and, in all things, an arctic isolation, as if our fellow human beings were made of so much snow and ice.

And there's no sickness that isn't isolation, and no isolation that isn't sickness. What does that mean? To the extent that my being is divided against itself, torn apart by civil war, my life becomes a struggle for survival. When you're physically sick, a similar conflict takes place. I've got a temperature, a headache, which means that within me there is a battle between my body and a virus. Each side is fighting for victory. And over time I can get used to living with my illnesses and diseases, just as I can get used to living with gossip, anger, hatred, resentment, and the increasing isolation that such things create within me, until my former state of health becomes a distant memory, if indeed I can remember it at all.

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[10] On the "opening of the heart," see Arch. Aimilianos, "The Prayer of the Holy Mountain: Yesterday and Today," 305.

We've created a way of life for ourselves, indeed an entire culture, in which we can't be bothered to pick ourselves up from our place of pain in order to seek our deliverance. It's like when you're sleepy, and can't get up from your bed: in the same way you get used to your closed heart, your private hell. But you need to hate this condition, to realize that it's death for you, and that only you can open the door.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock (Rev 3.20). This means that Christ knocks on the door of the heart, not just once or twice, but all the time. But I choose not to open it because I've learned to live without Him. It's like being used to having your own room, all to yourself, and suddenly you have to share it with someone else. The night seems unbearable, and you can't wait for the other person to leave, so you can have the place all to yourself. We like our solitude.

When someone interrupts our routine, it seems a terrible intrusion, and we get very ruffled by it. Isn't it odd? We desperately long for someone else to approach us, to speak to us, to love us, to fill our solitude, to unite with us, but as soon as someone does, we can't wait to get rid of them. We reject them immediately, pass judgment on them, speak to them with anger and contempt, presume to tell them what to do, say "no" to them, and in general do whatever we can to let them know that their presence bothers us. And we find hundreds of ways of telling them: "Go away. Leave me alone. Don't intrude on my solitude."

And everything bothers you; everything annoys you. The way people look, the sound of their voice, the way they walk, or because they're too short or too tall, or because their nose is like this or that, or because their eyebrows are too high or too low. Any little thing is enough to ruin your day, and, after that, all you want to do is run away. And what is all this, if not hell for the damned? And why have they gone to hell? Because they didn't want paradise. Hell is exactly what they were looking for, and exactly what they found.

But whenever we want, our heart can open and at once the great transformation will take place. And this is an opening to the spiritual fire, to the Holy Spirit, to Christ, to God. Do we want this? Will we unlock our heart? It all depends on whether we want to love God, or continue loving our selves. And if we do decide to stop living on our own, and throw open up the doors for the light to enter, then we'll discover that, while we were looking for God, we also found our fellow man, for now we realize that there are people all around us.

For many of us, this can be a rude awakening: after beholding Christ in our dreams, we find it annoying to open our eyes on a world filled with other people. Immediately we say: "I wasn't looking for you. I want Christ," forgetting that the stranger, the poor man, the prisoner, the sinner, and especially my enemy — especially the person who seeks to harm me — is Christ for me.

This, then, is the first disillusionment; the first conflict with my ego. Why do we seek Christ and spurn our fellow man? Because we feel that Christ respects us, and that somehow He'll do whatever it is we want. People, on the other hand, have mouths, and ideas, and opinions; they disagree with us and resist us; their will struggles against ours, their passions wage war against ours, and we're afraid we'll be defeated, we're afraid we'll lose our sovereignty over ourselves. Thus we worry, we feel wounded, we get upset, and tangled up in negative thoughts and attitudes. And the result is that we immediately lose our relationship with Christ.

When we get past this stage, when we begin to accept other people as they are; when we love them and live for them, sacrifice ourselves for them, discern their deepest needs and desires, and hasten to carry out whatever it is they want, *then* we begin to feel the presence of Christ, the presence of God.

These, then, are the first relations that we establish with Christ. At this stage, however, God remains inaccessible to us, but it seems as if we can hear His footsteps: He is approaching! This is only the beginning, but you can see what sort of struggle is required in order to overcome the self, to overcome our egotism, our desire to be exalted over everything else and be the only thing left. There is *no room in the inn* of our heart for the other (cf. Lk 2.7). But if we allow the other to *stay for awhile* (cf. Lk 24.29), then we discover that he is Christ. In the person of the other we find the Lord (cf. Mt 25.40). And then our love for the other, for our neighbor; our attention to his needs, his desires, and his pain, our openness to him, will be our opening to Christ. This is the dawn, the daybreak of Christ into our life.

From this moment on, you can never be satisfied; you can never find your rest in anything earthly or finite. Before that, all sorts of things please us and satisfy us: our talents, our achievements, the praise of others — there's always something to fill our lives, no matter how small.

Today, for example, I might have wanted to write a letter when I got up. Perhaps I saw that the pen wasn't quite right, so I started to fix it. I tried, and I made it worse. Now what? I take it to the person who knows about these things. In the meantime, I could have borrowed someone else's pen, but I'd rather spend the whole day getting mine repaired. And I could have easily found other ways to get my letter written, and gotten other things done besides, but I had to fix my pen instead.

Do you know how many things like that we do every day? Look and you'll see. We've all got something — some task, some project, some preoccupation — that we feel we must do; something that gives us a sense of satisfaction, and fills us to the point that we have little room left over for anything else. One person might be intent on fixing his watch; another might spend all day mending his habit. Somebody else might be hungry, go to get something to eat, find the refectory locked, and spend the rest of the day feeling thwarted, starving, and angry. Why? Because he started out in the wrong way, and thus the rest of the day was ruined. And what was his basic mistake? In thinking that he could find his fulfillment in something other than Christ.

But when you begin to hear the footsteps of God, then nothing but God can satisfy you. You don't want to stop anywhere or linger over anything, because nothing in the world can take the place of God: He alone can satisfy you. You want to fast more, to pray more, to keep vigil more, and to love more. Above all, your whole being tends toward Christ, to surrender yourself to Him, and to *wait* for Him: to *wait on the Lord* (Ps 26.16). You don't want anything except God. But you accept whatever is given to you, whatever is said to you, out of love for the giver. You don't cause problems. You don't concern yourself with problems. No matter what happens, you remain peaceful and serene, because you are *waiting on the Lord.*

Those who live in such a manner live in and for God. They begin to feel God's warmth, his breath, filling their hearts and all the space around them. Years ago, it was common to place a small mirror under the nose of someone who appeared to be dead. If the mirror became clouded over by breath, you would know that the person was still alive. And so now, with God, you begin to realize that you're alive: you begin to feel God Himself. Previously our heart was closed; now it has opened. These are the first two stages.

After this, we have a heart that acquires the capacity to sense and perceive things spiritually; a heart that hears and perceives God through the distant gloom. Such a heart, by means of its spiritual senses, is alert, poised, and waiting for God. A person at this stage is calm, serene, and cheerful. He's like someone whose home is in readiness, everything's in place, and he's sitting calmly, waiting for the arrival of his guest. Such a person may seem to be quite alone, but in the expectation of his love, all things are filled with perfect fullness. And this brings us to yet another experience in our lives.

We began with the harsh bitterness of solitude, which was a state of existence that we deliberately created and clung to. Why? Because this bitterness, this self-centeredness, this self-incarceration, this state of misery, is actually something that we enjoy. It's as if I lent you my alarm clock, and then a few days later asked for it back, because I needed it in the morning, but you go ahead and break it. I immediately become aware of how attached I was to that little alarm clock, and I become angry at you for being so careless. I look at the clock, broken into pieces, and my heart bleeds. That's the way my heart bleeds over my broken self. This is why the first leap is necessary: to free myself from my earthly attachments, which means to let go of my self-will and feeling of self-sufficiency.

After that, the sky clears and the horizon opens up. The person who lives in such openness is filled with gratitude; no cloud darkens his joy, and he is always singing songs of delight. He has no worries, feels no boredom, experiences no loneliness. We discover the world in all its created beauty, and all things bring us joy, but we are free, and thus we do not become attached to anything. Nowhere do we stop to idle. We are continually looking ahead.

If I am standing in a clear, open place, nothing prevents me from looking ahead, far into the distance, in every direction of the compass. The same thing happens in the spiritual life, when we *are grounded in love, and have the power to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ, and so be filled with all the fullness of God* (cf. Eph 3.18-19). All the horizons have expanded and opened. I feel that I've become universal, complete. I feel as if the whole world's become mine. Once I felt confined, like a dead man in a narrow grave. Once I was squinting out on the world from the fetid little room of my soul, which was jammed to the rafters with all the petty and lurid and unlovely things I've trailed behind me from the moment I was born. But now all that has radically changed.

This new experience — this opening of the heavens and the expansion of the horizon — is one of the most beautiful experiences that a person can have. From then on, the character of our life is changed. From then on, we soar through the sky on wings. Provided we want to. Because there's always the chance that, in our soaring flight, a treacherous, critical moment might come when we remember our self and prefer it over everything else. All things are indeed ours. But all things will turn against us like a bitter enemy if once again we become confined within ourselves.

But the moment we reject such narrowness and enter into the *breadth* and know the *depth of the love of Christ* (Eph 3.19), we discover that the whole world is ours: the earth, the sea, and the sky are all for us; so too the angels, the saints, and all the sacraments of the Church. And God Himself — the Father, the Son, and the

Holy Spirit — is wholly ours, for He gives Himself to us in His fullness. Do you see? You renounced a handful of trifles and gained the world. You surrendered yourself, and in return received God.

In this expansiveness, in this simplicity, this beauty, this abandonment of ourselves to God, we arrive at yet another experience: the enjoyment of God, in the sense of fruition and gleaning. What does that mean? It's as if I were hungry, and went into the garden, where I can pick a mandarin, or an apple, or whatever I like. I am gleaning the garden of its fruits. I am enjoying the fruitfulness of the garden. In spiritual terms, the whole world is such a garden, ripe with God, and so I take and eat my fill, *gathering up fruit for eternal life* (Jn 4.36). That's what the "enjoyment" of God means. I share in His life. I begin to feel that I am communing with Him. I begin to delight in Holy Communion, and I realize that today I have communion with God. I have partaken of Christ Himself. Or when I pray the Jesus Prayer, I realize that my breathing has accepted Christ, as has my mouth, which has invoked His holy name. My heart has received Him, and He fills my mind, so much so that I'm no longer sure where He is within me, because He is everywhere.

Somebody came to see me and I asked him about his prayer life. In response, he presented me with a wonderful problem. He was a humble, saintly man, who, with great patience, had endured much suffering and tribulation. But he had a profound sense of joy, because he'd reached the open space that we're talking about, and was able, whenever he wanted, to reach out and partake of God. He asked me the following question: "When I pray the Prayer of Jesus, I begin by quietly saying the words with my mouth, and feel that, at that moment, that's where Christ is. But as I continue, the prayer becomes something that I say internally, within myself, so that my mouth and tongue are no longer moving, and the prayer is no longer audible. And this is what I don't understand: at such moments, is my heart praying, or my intellect? I can't tell. I'm not vocalizing the prayer, and yet it continues, it goes on, by itself. What is happening at that moment? Am I perhaps not praying? Is this a state of deception? Is it my intellect or my heart that is addressing Christ? What exactly is taking place within me?"

What, indeed, is taking place at moments such as this? It's very simple: the battle that rages within us, which pits the heart against the mind, and tears both into pieces, has come to an end. Our state of dismemberment has ceased, and we arrive at simplicity and unity. Just as God is One, so we become one, unified whole. After that, we cannot easily separate or even distinguish the heart from the intellect, or say with which of the two (which have become one) we are praying with. The Fathers of the Church describe this state in very simple terms: the descent of the intellect into the heart. And this means that the whole person has attained unity, and thereafter functions naturally, organically, singly; almost, we might say, automatically. In fact, God now fills my entire being, and thus it is Christ Himself, Who, through my intellect and in my intellect, descends into the heart, while I myself am at rest. I yield to the divine presence, and my heart prays by itself.

This, then, is the true enjoyment of God. Such a soul partakes of God, and is filled, complete. Is it me, then, who is praying? Is it my heart that is praying? What exactly is going on? All we can say is that within me there is a dialogue with God, with Whom I experience union and communion. And in the face of this reality, I become, in a sense, a kind of spectator, a witness. As if I were sitting and listening to two people speaking, I now listen to myself talking to God. As for distinctions between the body, the spirit, the heart, and the intellect, these are no longer so easy to make: the more I separate myself from the world and the flesh, the more these things deepen, interpenetrate, and unify.

It follows now that Christ is a reality for me. God is now a vital, living subject. Not something abstract or generic, but something real and specific. In the same way that I recognize my personal belongings as mine — even in the dark — so now I recognize Christ at any moment of the day or night, in suffering and in joy.

I feel that God is mine, in the sense that He has called me forth from non-being into being and given me life. My isolation has been shattered, and I know I'm never going to be alone again. And so Christ becomes everything for me, present in my life, my breath, my thoughts, my heart, in all my actions. Whatever I do, wherever I go, I am not deprived of His presence, and He will never abandon me, for I have touched Him, and He is my reality.

Now you sense that you're communicating with God, that you're in contact with Him. And thus you acquire boldness when you speak to Him. Now you have a certain familiarity, as that of a child to its father, as a friend speaks to a friend (cf. Jn 15.14). And my whole being, my soul, my heart, becomes luminous, because God is light: living, active light. In my eyes, in my thoughts, in my will, I experience God as something luminous. I have been illumined, and all of my senses, all my perception, become a kind of vision, a spiritual vision. Just as there can be no bodily vision without light, there can be no spiritual vision without God.[11]

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[11] Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *Fourth Century on Various Texts* 17: "Just as it is impossible for the eye to perceive sensible objects without the light of the sun, so the human intellect cannot engage in spiritual contemplation without the light of the Spirit. For physical light naturally illumines the senses so that they may perceive physical bodies; while spiritual light illumines the intellect so

Once I've been filled with this luminous beauty, this perfect expansiveness, this pure openness, is there anything then can separate me from Christ? *Neither height, nor depth, nor anything else can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (cf. Rom 8.39). *Neither height nor depth*, neither heaven nor hell . . . absolutely nothing. My awareness of Christ is now so strong that everything I do is an act of offering, a gesture of obeisance to Him. This is what Paul means when he says that *whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we do everything for the glory of God* (1 Cor 10.31). Whatever I do, God is my point of reference, and all my actions combine in a steady advance towards Him. He goes before me, in shining light, and I follow.

In the same sense that the sun seems to absorb the light of all the stars when it rises in the morning sky, so now do I see all things in the light of Christ, who has risen in my heart like a spiritual sun (cf. 2 Pet 1.19). Everything I come across – my friends, enemies, praise, condemnation, hunger, satiety, pain, sickness, health, the death of my father, my success, my failure – all these things for me are Christ. I discover Him everywhere. I see His light shining in everything, for where is the place He is not? If there was such a place, no matter how small, it would mean that God Himself could not exist. If God were not everywhere, then He would be nowhere. But God exists, and as God He is everywhere, and thus, by means of His infinite light, I see Him in all things, and in all people.

Who, then, is this Christ for me? He is the Lord of my soul, my body, and my spirit. Formerly, the flesh had succeeded in dragging my soul down into the mud, and my soul, in turn, had dragged

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that it can engage in contemplation and thus grasp what lies beyond the senses" (*Philokalia*, 2:239).

my spirit into the deepest pits of hell. Now, however, flesh follows soul, and soul is obedient to spirit, and my finite, created spirit communes with the infinite, uncreated Holy Spirit of God.[12] Now my entire being is raised up, and lifted to the heights, and, being with the Spirit, I am whole, and wholly present. If you talk to me, I'm entirely yours. If you ask something of me, I'm entirely yours. If you love me, hate me, or berate me, I'm entirely yours. I can never be fragmented, because *nothing can separate me from the love of Christ* (Rom 8.39).

* * *

Spiritual rebirth, then, is something that requires effort on our part. No one else can open the door that we spoke about, which is locked and bolted from within. After that, there are no more doors, only a series of interior rooms. Once you open the door to the church and go inside, you will find that the rest of the doors are already open. You pass through the outer narthex, you pass through the inner narthex, you venerate first this saint, and then that one, without stopping anywhere. That's what spiritual rebirth is like: as long as I make a beginning, all the rest will follow.

Contrary, then, to what we think, the spiritual life isn't some-

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12. Compare St. Maximus the Confessor, *First Century on Various Texts* 56-57: "Where the intellect does not rule, the senses naturally assume the dominant role. The power of sin is somehow mingled with the senses and induces the soul by means of sensual pleasure to have pity for the flesh, to which it is joined. When the soul pursues the impassioned and pleasurable cultivation of the flesh as its natural task, it is diverted from a life lived in accordance with nature . . . but when the intelligence is in control, it draws the soul to the realm of spiritual realities which is its true home" (*Philokalia*, 2:176); cf. id., *Second Century on Various Texts* 9, 11 (ibid., 2:189-190).

thing that's crushing and painful, or so horrible and difficult that we'll never make any progress or experience any growth. And if we do feel that way, it means we haven't made a start, because if we had, we would have the feeling of being victorious and crowned.

If we'd made a start . . . therein lays the burden of the spiritual life. This is why St. Makarios says elsewhere: *"Hasten to enter the Holy City, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is also paradise"* (*Homily* 25.7). Do you see what he says? "Hasten." Don't just sit around. Get up. Get out of here. Be on your way. Make a start. And you should *"hasten to enter paradise"* because it's your business to do so: this is why you were created, this is why you were born. Everything you could wish for, everything you long for, everything that God has called you for, is there inside. What you think are merely theories are facts, and they're all inside waiting for you. So what are you sitting around for?

Before concluding, I'd like to return to something we were saying at one of our previous meetings, when we spoke about prophecies regarding the tomb of Christ, and how that tomb is also a womb. Do you remember? We said that the tomb of Christ is a womb from which sprang the spiritual seed, the eternal inheritance. Our spiritual life emerged from the fertile tomb of Christ.

And Scripture says that the chosen seed of the Lord will be innumerable. But this is not a reference to those who are born of *flesh and blood or the will of man* (cf. Jn 1.13), but rather to those who have been brought to birth through the spiritual seed of the Resurrection. This is why it says: *He shall inherit many* (Is 53.12). It does not say that "many shall inherit Him," but rather that *He shall inherit many.* You can work for a lifetime, and not be sure of attaining material success. Even less will your efforts enable you to inherit Christ. How, in any case, can darkness acquire the light? How is it possible for me, a sinner, to triumph over a saint, and make him or her my own? How can I, who am the sign of death and death itself, take hold of the Living Christ, the Source of Life? I am nothing. It is impossible.

That's why it says: *He shall inherit many.* He has to make *you* His legacy. He has to bind *you* to Him unremittingly. And don't be confused when we speak about you bringing Christ to birth within yourself. What in fact happens, as we said a moment ago, is that Christ brings *you* to birth — to spiritual rebirth — within Himself. All you need to do is give Him permission to do so. Biological birth takes place without the consent of the child, but in spiritual birth it is otherwise: its basic characteristic, indeed its sole condition, is my consent, my willingness to be born.

Christ will inherit us. He'll gather us all together. Just as a mother gathers her children together, and looks at them, and is proud of them, and loves them, that's what Christ does. He is the center, the source, and we are all gathered around Him.

On Holy Saturday, the priest scatters bay leaves throughout the church, and the song of inheritance is sung: *Arise, O God, and judge the earth, for You shall have an inheritance in all the nations* (Ps 81.8). Many people try to catch the leaves as they are being thrown, or position themselves so that some of the leaves might fall on them. And everyone is filled with the joy; you can see their happiness, their smiles, the love with which they wish each other a "good Resurrection." It is the joy of God's children, His inheritance, which He redeemed and gathered together from the depths of hell. Dispersed and scattered, God has gathered us from the ends of the earth.

What can separate us from such a God? What can separate us from Christ? Rejoice, my children, that the Lord has covered you with His laurels, with His divine energies, and with His light. Leap and be glad that He has granted you spiritual rebirth; that He has made your way straight, your road smooth (cf. Mk 1.3), your eyes to look directly at Him, with no obstructions, with *unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, being changed into His likeness, from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, Who is the Spirit* (2 Cor 3.18).

9. THEOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE*

I must admit that if, when I submitted the title of my talk, I had before me the picture I now see, I would have changed it to: "You are My Friends" (Jn 15.14). Indeed, beholding you all now as I do, I have the feeling, not that I've accepted an invitation to go and speak somewhere, but rather that I've returned home, to the place I have lived for so many years. Many of you I remember as teachers, and others as students and small children, but now you have grown and become fellow *laborers in the harvest of the Lord* (Mt 9.38).

For this reason, I'd prefer that my words today not be a formal speech, but rather a series of thoughts exchanged between friends. I would also like to say that it's no accident that I'm addressing teachers of theology, even though many of you are not "theologians" in the technical sense of that word. Nevertheless, I think that all baptized Christians are, in some way, theologians, as we shall see in what follows.

I

Our subject is "Theology and Experience," and thus the first thing we need to do is to define our terms, beginning with "theology" and "theologian." As understood by most people, "theology" means "discourse about God." From this point of view, theology is identified with things like sermons, homilies, or books and articles that in some way pertain to God or have God for their subject matter. Anyone engaged in this kind of work is a "theologian."

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* An address given to teachers of theology in the Metropolitan Diocese of Trikala, 5 November, 1983. In Greece, "theologians" include those who teach religion at the secondary level. Thus the Elder is not addressing university professors of theology or what could be called theological "professionals."

But if we want to understand the meaning of this term in its fullness, we need to go back to the beginning of the history of theology, and see who the first theologian was.

The first to speak on matters related to God, and thus the first theologian, was, as we all know, God Himself. In the story of creation, we see God stooping down over the earth, and saying: *Let there be light*, and *let there be a firmament,* and *let the dry land appear* (Gen 1.3, 6, 9). And these were not simply things that God said, but things that He did. And having done them, He deliberated within Himself, and spoke again, saying: *Let us make man according to Our own image and likeness* (Gen 1.26). He then proceeded to do just that, and this is of the greatest significance because it means that man is a copy, an image, of God's own life and existence.[1]

In creating man, God was, in effect, revealing Himself through His activity and works. He revealed Himself as active; as acting outside of Himself, outside the sphere of His proper being. The first to speak about God, then, was God Himself, the "creator of all things visible and invisible." And the subject of His discourse was nothing other than God Himself. It was, as we said, a kind of self-expression: God's self-revelation.

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[1] Consequently God is also the first "iconographer," on which see St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images* 2.20: "God Himself first made an image, and presented images to our sight, for *God created man in His own image* (Gen 1.27)" (Anderson, 65; cf. 76, 80); and St. Theodore Studites, *Antirrheticus* 3.2.5: "The fact that man was made *according to the image and likeness of God* (Gen 1.27) shows that the work of iconography is a divine action" (PG 99:420AB).

After this, the second "theologian" — second, that is, not in chronological order but rather in spiritual terms — is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of the Heavenly Father. In His self-revelation through creation, God the Father had already revealed Himself to be, not an abstract, impersonal force or energy, but rather a personal being; not as some *thing*, but as some*one* with a face, as we would say — a Person — that is, a personal God, Who is able to speak face to face with the persons He created. And this dialogue of God with human beings reflects the inner communion that takes place within God Himself between the Father and the Son.

After God the Father, then, we have God the Son, Who, according to the Prophet Isaiah, places Himself before the face of the Heavenly Father and opens His ear to Him. The Father speaks to the Son, and the Son says: *I neither disobey nor dispute* (Is 50.5). Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Second Person of the Holy Trinity, communicates with God the Father, and the two of them are in perfect accord. Indeed Their unity is such that, after His incarnation, Christ can say: *Whoever has seen Me has seen My Father* (Jn 14.9), and can ask: *Have I been with you so long, and still you ask where the Heavenly Father is?* (cf. Jn 14.9)

By means of all that He did, namely, His incarnation, His manner of life, his teaching, and His miracles, the Lord ceaselessly revealed the Person of the Father as He exists in relationship to the Son.

In the beginning, God revealed Himself through the making of man. Now the Son of God reveals God by *becoming* man. And this is why He says: *No one can reveal the Father except the Son* (Mt 11.27). Without Christ, it is not possible to understand God. The Son bears witness that He and the Father are two distinct Persons, Who are nevertheless One God, existing in total and perfect union and communion, so that one cannot be known apart from the other.[2]

Thus the "theology" taught by Christ is the revelation of the unity of God. Christ reveals to us that God is both One and a Trinity of Persons (although we have not yet spoken of the Holy Spirit).[3]

The Father, then, is revealed by the Son, chiefly through the incarnation. As St. Maximos the Confessor so beautifully puts it: "By appearing in flesh to human beings, He made known unto them the Unknown Father."[4] And He was able to do this because when He *became flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn 1.14), He did not depart from the *bosom of the Father* (Jn 1.18), which is why He is *the only mediator between God and mankind* (cf. 1 Tim 2.5). It is thus "through His incarnation that the Lord teaches us theology, that is, about God Himself."[5] As we said a moment ago, theology is not merely something that one says, but something that one does, and everything that Christ says and does is "theology." His entire person; all that He has and is, down to His smallest gestures, are revelatory of God.

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[2] St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his refutation of the Arian creed of Eunomios (*Against Eunomios* 2) argues that the names "Father" and "Son" are by definition relational, so that each name (or attribute) signifies and contains the other, thus no one is a "father" who does not exist in relation to a "son," just as there can be no "son" without the existence of a "father" (LNPNF 5:101-134).

[3] See St. Maximos the Confessor, *On the Lord's Prayer*: "Theology is taught us by the incarnate Logos of God, since He reveals in Himself the Father and the Holy Spirit. For the whole of the Father and the whole of the Holy Spirit were present essentially and perfectly in the whole of the incarnate Son, although they themselves did not become incarnate" (*Philokalia*, 2:287).

[4] Ibid.: "He makes the unknown Father manifest to men through the flesh, and gives those who have been reconciled to Him access to the Father through the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph 2.18)" (*Philokalia*, 2:286).

[5] As above, n. 1.

Turning to the Gospels, we see that the relationship between the Heavenly Father and the incarnate Son emerges with great clarity and power. We see, for example, the Lord praying to His Father in a manner that is both humble and yet befitting the behavior of a king. He speaks to His Father with boldness, and His Father responds, demonstrating that, whereas Christ was on earth and His Father was in heaven, there was no separation between them; neither were they one and the same person, but were in constant, unbroken communion, day and night. Through events such as these, described in the Gospels, the divine Persons reveal to us something of themselves, their characteristics, their attributes, the properties of their natures, and the distinctive marks of their persons. God, having become man, reveals Himself to mankind.

If we proceed further into the Sacred Scriptures — not in the historical order that the books have been arranged, but in a more spiritual manner — we shall discover the name of *Wisdom*, which is mystically ascribed to Christ. And thus Solomon cries to the Father: *Give me the Wisdom that sits by Your throne* (Wis 9.4). And who sits next to God, *at the right hand of the Father* (cf. Heb 1.3; 10.12; 12.2), exalted above all created things, if not the Lord Jesus Christ? For He is indeed the *Power and the Wisdom of God* (1 Cor 1.24).[6] Elsewhere Solomon says: *I determined to take Wisdom to live with me, knowing that She would be a counselor for me* (Wis 8.9).

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[6] Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1: "Another Solomon is signified here (i.e., Christ): one who is also *descended from the seed of David according to the flesh* (Rom 1.3), one whose name means 'peace,' the true king of Israel, and builder of God's temple. This other Solomon comprehends the knowledge of all things. His wisdom is infinite and His very essence is Wisdom" (McCambley, 44).

Wisdom, then, is clearly a Person, and not simply an attribute. It is the Son of God, Who is also God's Word; His *Wise* Word, as the Fathers say. From ancient times, Solomon points beyond time, and reveals the Person of the Son, Who *sits by the throne* of the Father, a situation which expresses their inseparable relationship, since there can be no Father without a Son, and no Son without a Father. Each one, at all times, points to the other. In this way we have a common, mutual revelation, which is, in essence, a self-revelation.

The name of "Wisdom" has also been given to the Holy Spirit, Who, like the Son, is a reflection of the Father. But the Spirit is also the Spirit of Christ, Who sends the Spirit into the world, and thus the Spirit is called the *Spirit of understanding* and the *Spirit of Wisdom* (Is 11.2; cf. Ex 31.3, 35.31; Si 39.6).[7] Because the Son and the Spirit are equally God, they share, in this instance, the same name and attribute. And like the Son, the Holy Spirit shares the throne of God.

As the Lord foretold before His departure, the Holy Sprit was to have no other role on earth than to make Christ present, to *take what is Christ's and declare it* to us, to reveal Him to us, and thereby *guide us into all truth* (Jn 16.13-15), so that the gift of theology would be complete. The Spirit, then, enables us to know the Son, *for no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit* (1 Cor 12.3), and the Son reveals the Father, *for no one*, He says, *comes to the Father, but by me* (Jn 14.6).[8]

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[7] The two Biblical passages cited above are also chanted in the "Praises" of the Matins of the Sunday of Pentecost.

[8] Compare St. Basil, *Letter* 38: "It is impossible for a man, if he has not been pre-

Let us now consider theology as it lives and unfolds in the life of particular human beings. To begin, who could deny that the Virgin Mary, by giving flesh to the Word, became both *Theotokos* and *theologos*, that is, both the Mother of God and a theologian? By allowing God to enter her womb, by clothing Him in the flesh of her humanity, by leading Him into the world on the day of His Nativity, she reveals on earth the Word Who is exalted beyond the heavens. Hence her prominent place in the iconography of the sanctuary, where she bears the epithet: "Wider than the Heavens." That which the universe itself cannot contain was present in her womb, and this is the wondrous, paradoxical sign of God's union with man. In giving birth to God, then, the Mother of God becomes a theologian.

We should also mention St. John the Baptist. His whole life was a witness, a gesture toward Christ, and thus his whole life was a theology, for he drew our eyes to the Savior of the world, saying *Behold the Lamb of God* (Jn 1.29). That simple phrase contains a complete and perfect theology.

As we have seen, theology is the revelation of God; the revelation of the communion, the unity in fullness, of the three Persons of the Godhead. Thus when we say that certain individuals are theologians, it means either that God reveals Himself in them, or that

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viously enlightened by the Holy Spirit, to arrive at a conception of the Son. . . . He who has mentioned the Spirit alone has embraced also Him of whom the Spirit is. And since the Spirit is of Christ and Christ is of God, he who grasps one end of a chain pulls along with it the other end also to himself, so he who draws the Spirit draws both the Son and the Father along with It" (LCL 1:207, 211). See also above, chap. 7, n. 19.

they, as theologians, reveal God by bringing forth and expressing what God Himself has given them. This is exactly what we see in the All Holy Theotokos, and it is also what we see in the lives of the Holy Apostles.

Theology as a revelation and embodiment of the Persons of the Holy Trinity was handed down to the Church by the Holy Apostles. They were eyewitnesses to the life and teaching of the incarnate Word, and thus received His revelation directly. The Apostles are therefore theologians because they had personal experience of Christ. This is why, when the time came for them to elect a twelfth apostle (cf. Acts 1.21-26), they had to find someone who, among other things, was fully acquainted with the life of Christ. They had to find someone who had heard Christ, who had lived with Him, experienced Him, and who could pass on to others what he received directly from Christ.

And this is also why St. Paul – one of the first, great mystical theologians, along with St. John the Theologian – in order to prove that he, too, was an Apostle, needed to acknowledge that he had seen Christ, that he had spoken to Him, and that he had suffered much for His sake (cf. Acts 9.1; 2 Cor 11.23). St. Paul's relationship with Christ was complete, and that is what made him both an apostle and theologian.

In the case of St. John the Theologian, we know that he obtained his theology directly from *the bosom of Christ* (cf. Jn 13.25).[9] And when later he received a revelation in the form of a *little book*, he was told to *take it and eat it* (Rev 10.9-10), so that his theology, which was a work of God, would emerge from within him, as a new, self-revelation of God Himself. And as he was about to declare the essential unity of the Holy Trinity, tradition tells us that he was uneasy about it, and sought confirmation from God. At that moment, the rock of the cave in which he was sitting on the island of Patmos, split into three. This, again, suggests that St. John, and all the apostles, did not merely want to *say* things, but to *see* and *experience* things, to which they might bear witness. *That which we have seen*, he says, *and which we have heard, and touched, and looked upon: that is what we proclaim to you* (1 Jn 1.1-2).

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[9] See Evagrios, *To Monks in Monasteries* 120: "The *breast* of the Lord is the knowledge of God; he who *reclines on it* (cf. Jn 13.25; 21.20) will be endowed with theology" (Sinkewicz, 130); cf. id., *Letter to Melania* 13: "The great treasury which contains all the stores of wisdom is the breast of Christ, to which John lay close during the Supper" (Sinkewicz, 266).

After the Apostles, theology is transmitted within the Church through the succession of the Fathers, who were the trumpets and mouths of Christ, just as Christ Himself is called the "mouth of God."[10] As such, the theology of the Fathers of the Church sings and celebrates the "Monarchic Unity of the Holy Trinity."[11] The Fathers were not inventors of theories, but revealers of the Word. They did not construct discourses, but rather received messages, which they brought forth from within themselves, and, in bringing them forth, brought forth the Word, the revelation of the Lord. *What they had seen, touched, and looked upon: that is what they proclaim to us* (cf. 1 Jn 1.1-2), namely, the unity of God in Three Persons.

In speaking of the Holy Apostles and the Fathers of the Church, we return to the story of creation, for the holy Fathers are true *im-*

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[10] See, for example, St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans* 8: "He (i.e., Jesus Christ) is the mouth which cannot lie, by which the Father has spoken truly" (LCL, 237).

[11] From the *Canon to the Holy Trinity* (8th tone, 2nd verse of the 7th ode).

ages of God. All that they said and did was *according to the image and likeness of God* (Gen 1.26). And they celebrate the liturgy of theology in the company of all creation, for together with them the *heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps 18.1); the *rivers lift up their voices* (Ps 92.4); the *mountains rejoice* (Ps 97.8) and *skip like lambs at the presence of the Lord* (Ps 113.6). *Deep calls unto deep* (Ps 42.7) and *night proclaims knowledge to night* (Ps 18.3); the *morning stars sing together and shout for joy* (Job 38.7), indeed *there are no tongues or voices in which* the praise of God *is not heard* (Ps 18.4), so that *even the very stones cry out: Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!* (cf. Lk 19.38-40).[12]

As the voices of creation praise God, they rise from the earth and join with the songs of the angels. In their hymns to the creator, the angels likewise show themselves to be "theologians," for their every word and gesture is a revelation of God. And this is why angels have theologically revealing names. "Gabriel," for example, means "God and man," and thus reveals God's activity on earth, and especially His incarnation (cf. Lk 1.26). The name "Michael" reveals the strength of God. "Seraphim" denotes fire and warmth, and reveals to us the burning, luminous energy of God (cf. Is 6.2-6).[13] "Cherubim," on the other hand, signifies the highest contemplations of the transcendent God (cf. Gen 3.24; Ex 25.18-22).[14] It follows, then, that all of these angelic beings are theologians, inasmuch as they proclaim and hymn the glory and holiness of God.

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[12] See also the Elder's remarks on Ps 18.1 (*Let us Rejoice in the Lord,* 210-211; 216-217; 224), which deal at length with the question of divine revelation through creation.

[13] Compare St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy* 7.1: "Those with a knowledge of Hebrew are aware of the fact that the holy name 'seraphim' means 'fire-makers,' that is to say, 'carriers of warmth' . . . thus the name 'seraphim' teaches this: a ceaseless movement around the divine things, penetrating warmth, the overflowing heat of a movement which never falters and never fails . . . the power to purify by means of the lightning flash and the flame . . . and the capac-

Here we should say something about the sacraments – more properly called *mysteries* – which are not only closer to us, but even *the angels themselves long to gaze upon* them (cf. 1 Pet 1.12). The sacraments are the mysterious workings and actions of the Church. We see oil in the sacrament of Holy Unction, and bread and wine in the Eucharist, but the mystery isn't what we see. Instead, mysteriously present in the oil is the Holy Spirit, just as the fullness of Christ is present in the consecrated bread and wine.

Through a life of prayer and participation in the mysteries of the Church, each one of us may become a theologian. How? By growing in likeness to Christ, because to be a theologian means to be transformed, to be *changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another* (2 Cor 3.18), to be *conformed to Him in His sufferings and death* (Phil 3.10): *for if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His* (Rom 6.5).

And who was more closely conformed to Christ in his sufferings than the Holy Martyrs? The word "martyr" means to "bear witness," or to "give testimony," and by their sufferings the mar-

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ity to push aside and to do away with every obscuring shadow" (Luibheid, 161-162); and ibid., 15.2: "The image of fire best expresses the way in which the intelligent beings of heaven are like the Deity" (followed by an extensive comparison between fire, light, and the attributes of God) (ibid., 183-184).

[14] Id., *On the Celestial Hierarchy* 7.1: "The name 'cherubim' signifies the power to know and to see God, to receive the greatest gifts of His light, to contemplate the divine splendor in primordial power, to be filled with the gifts that bring wisdom" (Luibheid, 161).

tyrs witnessed to the presence and power of Christ. They are *par excellence* theologians. If you look carefully at the accounts of their trials, you'll see that they were not simply courtroom proceedings, but theological dialogues. In most cases, the problem was the unity of God: is there one God or are there many gods? The martyrs maintained that God is one, and were put to death for their refusal to profess the spirits, gods, and demons of the fallen world.

The early Church was watered with the blood of the martyrs, and that first growth was revitalized by the sufferings of the New Martyrs: men, women, and children who suffered martyrdom during the Muslim occupation of Orthodox lands. Here, too, we see that their trials were theological dialogues. The Turks held that God was One, and that Christ, as a result, could not be God. The martyrs agreed that God was One, but maintained that Christ is God, without compromising divine unity or simplicity. Again, the bone of contention was the oneness of God, although here the issue was faith in the Holy Trinity.

Theology, then, is an experience of God that enables the theologian to be a witness to, and a revelation of, God.[15] It's something that exists within me; that dwells within the depths of my being: it is my spirit's knowledge of the Triune Unity, to which my life and words give testimony.

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[15] Compare St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 1.37: "A word born of righteous activity is one thing, and a beautiful speech another. Even without experience, wisdom is clever at imparting beauty to her words, at speaking the truth without really knowing it, and at making declarations on virtue while the man himself never makes trial of it in his deeds. Speech that comes from righteous activity is a treasury of hope, but wisdom not based on righteous activity is a deposit of disgrace. Just as when an artist frescoes water on the walls and cannot relieve his thirst with it, or just as a man dreams beautiful dreams, even so is speech not based on righteous activity. [38.] A man who talks of virtue from the experience of his own labor transmits virtue to his hearer just as though he distributes money earned from

II

How should an aspiring theologian go about acquiring what we might call a theological consciousness? How should he or she best appropriate the intellectual and cognitive content of the Orthodox theological tradition? How, in other words, does a person become a theologian? The answer is simple, and we can best consider it from four different points of view.

In the first place, it should be stated that theological study is a means by which we can spiritually ascend to God. Proper study requires concentration, dedication, patience, and sustained, intellectual effort, and these are all virtues that can assist us in our journey to God.[16] What we ourselves bring to the task of theology is by no means insignificant. And this is why theologians bear particular responsibility for their words and actions. In proportion to their spiritual state and capacities, theologians form within themselves — and transmit to others — a true or false image of God. It follows, then, that our experience of God is linked to our experience of others.

Let us recall the words of the Prophet David: *God stands in the assembly of gods; in the midst He will judge gods* (Ps 81.1). This means that God cannot be considered in separation from the people He created and redeemed. And these people can be called *gods* to the extent that they share in the life of God, in the measure that they

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his own commerce, and as it were from out of his own possessions he sows his teaching in the ears of those who give him ear" (*Homilies*, 8).

[16] See Arch. Aimilianos, "Spiritual Study."

have attained godlikeness. They are *images* of God, which we spoke about a moment ago. And God sits in judgment of them. It is God who interprets theologians, and not the other way around; He sifts them, sorts them out, and decides who is upright and who has gone astray; who is correct in his theology, and who is not.

The *assembly* — or *congregation* — *of gods* is the Church, which bears God within itself.[17] There can be no God without the Church, and no Church without God. Thus the theologian, the little *god*, must, like all human beings, find his place in the experience and life of the Church. For his theology to be true, in order for him to be a true witness to God, he must participate fully in the life of the Church. There is no theologian outside the Church.

The men and women whom God *judges* to be *gods* are those whom we call saints. The theologian, then, will be on familiar terms with the saints. He will encounter them on a daily basis, and they will provide him with a standard of judgment for his work. If I want to know whether or not my theology is free from error, or to what extent it approximates the truth, I will measure it against the saints of the Church. It is in the mirror of the saints that I shall discover the meaning and value of my theology.

In order to do this, however, I'll need to be immersed in the sources and know how to interpret them. I'll have to learn the

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17. Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *Second Century on Theology* 25: "If the Divine Logos of God the Father became son of man and man so that He might make men gods and sons of God, let us believe that we shall reach the realm where Christ Himself now is; for He is the *head of the whole body* (cf. Col 1.18), and endued with our humanity has gone to the Father as forerunner on our behalf. God will stand *in the midst of the congregation of gods* (Ps 81.1) — that is, of those who are saved — distributing the rewards of that realm's blessedness to those found worthy to receive them" (*Philokalia*, 2:143).

meanings of theological terms. I can't be a theologian if I don't have accurate knowledge of theological terms, because otherwise I'll wander away from the true knowledge of God. In other words, I'll fall into heresy.[18]

And this is why many of the early heresies were popular among the masses. The latter were unable to understand the subtleties of theological language; they couldn't see what was at stake in the use of a particular term or phrase, and so they fell away from the truth. And when they did, they left the Church, having broken their communion with God. But a theologian must have all the key terms at his fingertips – Unity, Trinity, nature, essence, energy, person, hypostasis, property, attribute, etc. – and these words have to become *your* words in such a way that they bear witness to your relationship to God. Rather than merely being abstract ideas that you've read about in a book, they must be things you've experienced in your personal life.[19]

Authentic theology, then, is the authentic quest for God, because it reveals God in His relation to the Church and the world.

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[18] Compare St. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 1.2: "Those who are idle in the pursuit of righteousness count theological terminology as secondary, together with attempts to search out the hidden meaning in this phrase or that syllable, but those conscious of our calling realize that we are to become like God, so far as this is possible for human nature. But we cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him, and without lessons there will be no knowledge. Instruction begins with the proper use of speech, and syllables and words are the elements of speech. Therefore to scrutinize syllables is not a superfluous task. . . . If a man spurns fundamental elements as insignificant trifles, he will never embrace the fullness of wisdom" (Anderson, 16).

[19] Compare St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrine* 127: "A true philosopher does not simply learn about divine things, but actually experiences them" (*Philokalia*, 4:245).

It is the revelation of God outside of Himself, in His uncreated energies. This, then, is what we mean when we speak of theological study.

Secondly, if we attend to the sources in this manner, and especially to the writings of the Fathers of the Church, we will hear them asking us a question: "Do you truly desire to become a theologian?" Do you want, in other words, to become worthy of God? If so, "walk in the way of God's commandments."[20] To become a theologian, you have to become worthy of theology, worthy of God. You have to become someone whom God inspires so that your words will be an exhalation of the divine breath.

Theology is not simply intellectual activity. It is a way of life, a journey to God. Theology is a life of sanctification and communion, characterized in particular by freedom from the passions and the power of the senses. Theology, then, involves the "way of the commandments" that St. Gregory speaks of. And this is why he says elsewhere that "theology is not for everyone, but only for those who are advanced in contemplation, and who have been purified in body and soul, because for the impure to touch the pure is, we may safely say, not safe."[21] And this is nothing more than the teaching of the Lord Himself, Who proclaims: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God* (Mt 5.8).

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[20] The quotations are from St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 20 (PG 35:1080B).

[21] *Oration* 27.3 (= First Theological Oration) (LNPNF 7:285); cf. id., *Oration* 3.12: "It is good to speak concerning the things of God for God's sake, but it is better for a man to make himself pure for God." See also St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 4: "It is just as shameful for lovers of the flesh and the belly to search out spiritual things as it is for a harlot to discourse on chastity; a mind occupied with worldly affairs cannot approach the inquiry into the things of God" (*Homilies*, 36); id., *Homily* 6: "The knowledge of God does not dwell in a pleasure-loving body. . . . If you have no works, do not speak of virtues" (ibid., 54, 60); id., *Ho-*

The words *they shall see*, immediately suggest the illuminating action of God, which is the descent of the Holy Spirit. To "keep myself pure," then, and to be "advanced in contemplation," means to participate in the life of the Holy Spirit. He is "Light from Light," and I become light by receiving light. The Holy Spirit is light poured out, light transmitted, which has inundated my personality. This is the light that transforms my being, and transforms me into itself. It is the light that brings all things to perfection. It is God Who dwells with us for ever.

Before they address theological matters, then, theologians must first address themselves to the Holy Spirit. They must confide in Him, supplicate Him, bow down before Him, and watch out for Him. If they do this, they will abide in God, and will gaze upon Him unceasingly.

And so the "way" that St. Gregory the Theologian spoke about is nothing other than the Holy Spirit. And this why another Father says that "the man who is moved to act by God in the Holy Spirit cannot

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mily 15: "He who is pure of soul and chaste in life always speaks the words of the Spirit discreetly . . . but when a man's heart is crushed by the passions, his tongue is moved by them; and even though he speak of spiritual matters, yet he discourses passionately" (ibid., 87); id., *Homily* 72: "Until a man has been purified, he is not even capable of hearing of it (i.e., spiritual knowledge), for no one is able to acquire it by instruction" (ibid., 353); and St. Symeon the New Theologian, *The First Theological Discourse*: "Tell me, what more unclean thing can there be than a man who in his presumptive pride tries to teach the things of the Spirit without the Spirit? What is more abominable than an unrepentant man who does not purify himself beforehand, but neglecting this task tries to theologize on the basis of pseudo-knowledge and a worldly wisdom?" (McGuckin, 116).

help but theologize."[22] He is a theologian because he has been acted upon by the Holy Spirit, and it is the activity of the Spirit that enables him to know who he is, and what he has. But without the Holy Spirit, everything your mind sees is false, an illusion, and whatever you say about God will be empty sounds, dissolving into the air.[23]

A theologian, then, is somebody who pours forth, who brings up from within himself, the power and presence of God, so that *out of his heart flow rivers of living water, which is the Holy Spirit* (Jn 7.38-39). Here we think of St. Seraphim of Sarov, who said: "Acquire the Holy Spirit within you, and thousands of people around you will be saved."[24] To be a theologian is not a question of speculating about God: it is rather to bring God forth from the inner treasury of your heart. This is what St. Seraphim is telling us: "Do you want to be a theologian; do you want be a witness to God? Do you want to be a preacher or a missionary? Do you want thousands of souls to be saved? Acquire the Holy Spirit, and then you will be a theologian." And the breath of the Spirit, coursing through your being, will inspire you, and play upon you like a musical instrument. He will strike the chords of your heart and your intellect, and through you God will reveal His divinity.

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[22] St. Kallistos Kataphygiotes, *On Divine Union and the Contemplative Life* 84 (PG 147:928).

[23] Compare St. Niketas Stethatos, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 85: "No one can devote himself to theology and speak about what pertains to God unless so empowered by the Holy Spirit; and no one when inspired by the Spirit of God says anything contrary to faith in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12.3)" (*Philokalia*, 4:167); and St. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines* 128: "Those who write and speak and who wish to build up the Church, while lacking the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are 'psychic' (cf. 1 Cor 2.14) or worldly people void of the Spirit, as St. Jude observes (cf. Jude 19). Such people come under the curse which says, *Woe to those who are wise in their own sight, and esteem themselves as possessors of knowledge* (Is 5.21), for they speak from themselves and it is not the Spirit of God that speaks in them (cf. Mt 10.20). For those who speak what are simply their own thoughts before they have attained purity are deluded by the spirit of self-conceit. . . . What people say when they speak on their own account is repellent and murksome, for their words do not come from the living spring of the Spirit, but are spawned from the morass of their own heart, a bog infested with desire, delusion, and dissipation; the water of their knowledge is evil-smelling, turbid and torpid, sickening to those who drink it and filling them with nausea and disgust" (*Philokalia*, 4:247).

[24] See Valentine Zander, *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, trans. Gabriel Anne (London: SPCK, 1975), 24.

In the third place, we need to say a word about asceticism.[25] We recognize that many activities in life require preparation and training. For example, in order to be a musician or an athlete, you need the proper training, and you have to continue to practice and exercise in order to maintain and improve your level of ability and performance. Similarly, the Church has defined and established certain essential practices, without which no one can *stand in the assembly of the gods* (Ps 81.1), and thus cannot be a theologian.[26] These practices include fasting, vigils, and prayer, and together

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25. See above, chap. 1, n. 11.

26. Compare St. Neilos the Ascetic, *Ascetic Discourse*: "To master any art requires time and much instruction; can the art of arts alone be mastered without being learnt? No one without experience would go in for farming; nor would someone who has never been taught medicine try to practice as a doctor. The first would be condemned for making good farmland barren and weed-infested; the second, for making the sick worse instead of better. The only art which the uninstructed dare to practice, because they think it the simplest of all, is that of the spiritual way. What is difficult the majority regard as easy; and what Paul says he has not yet apprehended (cf. Phil 3.12), they claim to know through and through, although they do not know even this: that they are totally ignorant" (*Philokalia*, 1:215).

they constitute the core of the ascetic life of the Church. "By means of fasting, vigils, and prayer, you received heavenly gifts" — these are words that we sing to many of the saints.[27] Ascetic struggle is the way to meet God in the Holy Spirit. To put it differently, fasting, vigils, and prayer are the *language* that I use to speak to God. When I do these things, I speak to God and say: "God, I'm waiting for You, and I want You."[28]

Do you remember how St. Paul was commissioned to preach? Do you recall under what circumstances the Holy Spirit was able to communicate His will to the Church? *While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set Saul apart for Me for the work that I have called him to'* (cf. Acts 13.2). And when were the mysteries of heaven revealed to the Apostle Peter? *When he was praying, and became hungry, he fell into a state of ecstasy, and saw the heavens opened* (Acts 10.9-10).

Do you see the role that asceticism plays in our relationship to the Spirit, and in the work of theology? When you fast, when you become increasingly hungry, when your stomach starts to feel pain, your spirit begins to go into labor with God. As Isaiah says: *We have been in pain and have given birth to a spirit of salvation* (Is 26.18). But a full stomach, coddled with rich foods selfishly consumed with no regard for the fasts of the Church, gives birth only to corruption, sickness, and death.

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[27] The phrase is taken from the dismissal hymn sung for monastic saints.

[28] See Arch. Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*, 92 "Asceticism by itself has no power. It is simply a language that God hears and understands. If you make a meaningless sound, I will be in no great hurry to respond. But if your cry is understandable, meaningful, then I will run to help you. In the same way, asceticism is a language, a sign, that God recognizes and rushes to." See also above, chap. 1, n. 12.

The theologian, then, is not someone who talks about God, but someone whose spirit, by means of prayer and asceticism, *turns from the darkness and rises to God like the dawn* (cf. Ps 62.1). He or she is someone who stands in the presence of the Lord, placing themselves within the vision of the invisible Trinity. Here is God and here am I. The theologian is so close to God, that, like John the Baptist, he is able to point to Him and say: *Behold the Lamb of God* (Jn 1.29). My whole life, my heart, my intellect, all that I say and do, become a single gesture revealing the presence of God. Like the Baptist, "I place my hand upon the head of the Lord."[29] With my entire being I touch the untouchable God, and this is why I am a theologian.

To round out our picture, let's add one final element from St. Neilos the Ascetic. In all his writings, St. Neilos is concerned with human problems, with our sorrows and sufferings, for which he gives the most wonderful answers. You're probably all familiar with his much-quoted saying, which is at once so shattering, so terrible, and yet so beneficial and comforting: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly."[30] It's as if he's saying: "Are you a theologian? That's fine: as long as you pray truly."

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[29] A major theme from the feast of Theophany; see, for example, the *Doxastikon* of the Ninth Hour: "With thine hand hast thou touched the immaculate head of the Master (chanted 3 times). And with the finger of that hand thou hast shown Him to us: on our behalf, O Baptist, stretch out that same hand over Him, for thou hast great boldness before Him . . ." (*Festal Menaion*, 332-333).

[30] This phrase, long ascribed to St. Neilos, in fact belongs to Evagrios, *On Prayer* 61 (*Philokalia*, 1:62). Evagrios was a disciple of St. Gregory the Theologian, and the phrase cited above encapsulates the latter's teaching that the "theologian" is someone who, through prayer and ascesis, has attained true knowledge of God in contemplation. Thus for Evagrios, true prayer (or theology) is the mind's "high-

Many theologians ask themselves: "Am I truly a theologian? Am I worthy of being a theologian?" To these questions, St. Neilos' response is of great comfort. Let's look at his words carefully. First he says: "If you are a theologian." He begins by saying "if" because he leaves it up to us; he doesn't want to deprive us of our freedom, or deny, or even place in question, our calling as theologians. After that, he continues in the present indicative tense and says "you are a theologian." Do you see what comfort and relief he brings to those theologians who are conscientiously doing their best, and who agonize over their work, asking themselves: "Who am I to talk about God? *I am lost; I am a man of unclean lips* (Is 6.5)." But St. Neilos tells them: "If you pray truly, you are a theologian."

In speaking of prayer, St. Neilos, like all the Fathers, speaks of *the* prayer, namely: the Prayer of the Heart. This is the ceaseless invocation of the name of Jesus, the unbroken contemplation of God through Christ. Whether I want to or not, whether I am able to or not, the Prayer of the Heart will bring me understanding, and as

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est act of intellection" (35), and is ultimately the contemplation of God Himself (51); as such it is a gift of God and the Holy Spirit (59, 63-64). In his commentary on Ecc 5.1, Evagrios states that "one should not pronounce thoughtlessly on matters of theology, because those who live in the physical world, and who derive their conceptions from it, cannot possibly speak with precision about God, Who exists among intelligible realities and completely transcends sense perception" (SC 397:116), a warning he repeats in his *Gnostikos*: "One should not pronounce thoughtlessly on matters of theology, neither should one define or delimit the divine within categories, for such delimitation pertains only to complex, created things" (SC 356:132). See also his remarks on Prov 25.17: "We should only rarely take up theological problems, lest we utter something about God that should not be said, and through such impiety fall away from spiritual knowledge, because the intellect, on account of its native weakness, cannot focus continuously on such lofty contemplation" (SC 340:400-402).

soon as I say: "Lord Jesus Christ," it will bring me the Lord Himself, for it is His name, His form, and His glory, that are enfolded in the words of this prayer.[31]

Just as a child within its mother's womb kicks and makes its presence known, so too does God move about within me. Sometimes He makes my eyes sparkle with joy, and sometimes he fills them with tears. Sometimes I cry aloud, and other times I say to myself: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." It is prayer, then, and the Jesus Prayer in particular, that makes us theologians.

St. Basil says that "the soul, through its ardent contemplation and love of God, is made worthy of the gift of theology by the power of God Himself, Who enables the eyes of the soul to see all that they desire."[32] My invocation of the name of Jesus is my "ardent contemplation and love of God." It means that I speak to God all the time, simply and naturally, in a filial and friendly way. And as the eyes of my heart are turned to God, He gives me "the gift of theology," He "enables the eyes of my soul to see all that they desire." Theology, then, is a living experience, a vision of the invisible God. It is an experience of the uncreated energies of God.

III

Theology is a gift, a charism bestowed by God.[33] And if this gift is the experiential knowledge and revelation of God Himself, then it is the greatest of God's gifts. To become a theologian, therefore, is by no means a simple task. God often covers up his visions, *like a bird gathering her brood under her wings* (Mt 23.27), for "every thing that is above another is concealed from what is beneath it."[34] And thus the most perfect, the most sublime, the highest gifts of the Holy Spirit are revealed only to those whom God has chosen. To whom, then, does God reveal these gifts?

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[31] On the Jesus Prayer, see Arch. Aimilianos, "Catechism On Prayer," and id., "The Prayer of the Holy Mountain: Yesterday and Today."

[32] *Commentary on Isaiah* 3 (PG 30:124AB).

[33] Compare St. Diadochos of Photike, *On Spiritual Knowledge* (*Philokalia*, 1:275-277).

St. Gregory the Theologian says that "when we are free from all external defilement and disturbance," then the Holy Spirit can speak to us, because "we must cease from all activity in order to know God."[35] To know God, we must be free and untroubled. Our mind must be pure and focused: if you try to look at too many things at once, you won't see anything. A theologian, then, can't be interested in a whole host of things, and certainly not the "defilement and disturbance" of the world, all of which the Church *reckons as dung* (cf. Phil 3.8). A turbulent and storm-tossed sea will not reveal to you its depths. To see and know deeply, you need perfect peace and calm.

St. Gregory is describing an ascetic withdrawal from the things of the world, in an effort to encounter God in the depths of the heart. In one place, he speaks rather directly about his personal experience of this, although he does so under the figure of Moses' entry into the cloud on Mt. Sinai (Ex 20.21):

> What is this that has happened to me, O friends, and initiates, and fellow-lovers of the truth? I was running with an aim to lay hold on God, and so I ascended up into the Mount, and drew aside the curtain of the cloud, leaving behind matter and material things, and as far as I could I withdrew within myself. And

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[34] St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 26 (*Homilies*, 129).

[35] *Oration* 27.3 (= First Theological Oration) (LNPNF 7:285).

> looking up I caught a glimpse of the averted figure of God . . . and when I looked a little closer, I saw, not the First and Unmixed Nature, which is known only to Itself (to the Holy Trinity, I mean) and remains behind the inner curtain, concealed by the cherubim. Rather it was that aspect of God that at last reaches down even to us, the glory of God revealed within creation.[36]

According to St. Gregory, no theologian can know God in His essence. We cannot know that "First Nature which remains above, hidden by the cherubim," but only the divine energies, "which reach down even to us."

How Moses struggled! He asked God to be allowed to see Him, face to face, but God showed him only *His back parts* (Ex 33.20-23). Many centuries had to pass before Moses was granted a face-to-face encounter with God, and it occurred, not on Mt. Sinai, but on Mt. Thabor, on the day of the Transfiguration (Lk 9.30-31). Are you better than Moses? Are you able to ascend the mountain of theology, endure the blasts of the trumpets, and withstand the terror of the fire and the lightning? Even if you could do all that, you wouldn't be satisfied. At some stage, you'll have to get to Mt. Thabor — which is the mountain of the heart — for only there *will you see God as He is* (1 Jn 3.2).

As for us, are we theologians? Have we fasted, kept vigil, and prayed? Have we suffered for the sake of God? What have we learned? What have we understood? Who are we, what are we? What is contained within the store-rooms of our heart? Perhaps we sense the "defilement" and feel the "disturbance" more than we would like to. And yet, every day, we say: *The hidden and secret things of Your wisdom You have made manifest to me* (Ps 50.8). But being deeply aware of his unworthiness, David immediately added: *You shall sprinkle me with hyssop and I shall be clean* (Ps 50.9). It is God Who reveals Himself to us; it is God Who makes us theologians. But now my heart must be cleansed, so that by my tears and God's grace, I may become a little more of a theologian, and reach the summit of my own Mt. Thabor.[37]

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[36] *Oration* 28.3 (= Second Theological Oration) (LNPNF 7:289).

As theologians, we can do no better than to acknowledge, every day, our utter inadequacy, our total inability, and yet, at the same time, to be grateful to God for making us theologians. Let us not, however, forget the words of St. John Klimakos: "From this moment on, let us withdraw from the things of the world, and let us devote ourselves to our task, for we have inscribed our names in the register of the devout."[38] Let us distance ourselves from all other tasks, because our sole task is theology.

In order to bring our remarks to a close, let us return to St.

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[37] Compare St. Niketas Stethatos, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 52: "For those who like Peter have advanced in faith, and like James have been restored in hope, and like John have achieved perfection in love, the Lord ascends the high mountain of theology and is transfigured (cf. Mt 17.1). Through the disclosure and expression of His pure teaching He shines upon them as the sun, and with the intellections of His unutterable wisdom He becomes radiant with light. They see the Logos standing between Moses and Elijah — between law and prophecy — promulgating the law and revealing through prophecy and vision the depths and hidden treasures of wisdom. The Holy Spirit overshadows them like a luminous cloud, and from the cloud they hear the voice of mystical theology, initiating them into the mystery of the Holy Trinity" (*Philokalia*, 4:155).

[38] *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 29 (Moore, 224).

Seraphim of Sarov. When his disciple asked him if he (that is, the disciple) had the Holy Spirit, and how he could know if he had the Holy Spirit, St. Seraphim showed him his face, which was radiant with the light of the Holy Spirit. At that moment, the two of them were flooded by the uncreated light of God. And then St. Seraphim spoke, and said: "Do you understand, my child? As you yourself saw, for us to be bathed in this light, I did not even make the sign of the cross. All I did, for a moment, was to pray within my heart. And that prayer was enough for the both of us to enter into the light of God. As you saw, the Lord immediately hearkened to the voice of humble Seraphim." He wanted to show him how easy it is for even one small cry of ours to bring God cascading down upon us.[39]

Who among us is perfect? We're only average, if even that. This is why St. Gregory the Theologian says that "theology is not for everyone." Who, then, is it for? "It is only for those who are purified in soul and body." Only for them, and no one else? "It is only for those who are purified in soul and body, or for those who are in the process of being purified."[40]

Being purified. Not yet purified, not yet pure, not yet perfect, but *being* purified, in the process of purification. You aren't purified yet? From this very moment you can make a start of it. Do you see how kind he is, how gracious? He modifies what he says so that we can get up, get moving, and become increasingly like God. Those being cleansed are not yet clean. Those being purified are not yet pure. But they are on their way.

Let us then, continue to struggle on the path of purification. Let us continue to pray, to speak to God through the language of asceticism. Through fasting let us be filled with God. Let *zeal* for theology *consume us* (Jn 2.17). Through our withdrawal from the world let us enter the kingdom of heaven. Having put our passions to sleep, let the word of theology arise sonorously from our inner silence. Ascend the mountain of theology, settled though it be with thick clouds, for *now we know only in part, as if through a mirror, but the day will come when partial things will cease, and we shall see the whole* (cf. 1 Cor 13.12).

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[39] For a full account, see Zander, 83-97 (cited above, n. 24).

[40] *Oration* 27.3 (= First Theological Oration) (LNPNF 7:285).

10. REVELATION AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN HUMILITY*

Today is the beginning of the *Triodion*, which is one of the most significant days in the life of the Church.[1] Today we cross a threshold. Today a shift occurs, the atmosphere changes, and all the essential elements are transformed. And all of this happens in order to prepare us for the greatest and most wonderful period of the year: Great Lent. The *Triodion* opens up a door which leads directly to heaven. The *Triodion* is an enchanting meadow, where Christ is the shepherd, and God feeds His spiritual flock.[2]

As we heard in the matins service this morning, Christ enters the life of the Church with a special mission, "teaching us, by parables, to correct our lives."[3] What does it mean to "correct your life"? It means to clarify your position with respect to God and the Church.

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* A homily delivered in the Metropolitan Diocese of Drama, on 23 February, 1986.

[1] The *Triodion* is a liturgical book containing the services from the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee through Holy Saturday, comprising a nine-week period of fasting and repentance in preparation for the celebration of Easter. The *Triodion*, or "Book of Three Odes," is so entitled because only three odes are chanted on weekdays, instead of eight as at other times of the year. For an overview, see *Lenten Triodion*, 13-15, 28-34.

[2] See Arch. Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*, 185-186: "We are now entering the period of the *Triodion*, the arena of spiritual combat. . . . The very existence of the *Triodion* reveals the nature of the Church's spirituality, charismatic mission, and transcendent character — which is also very human — along with its eschatological horizon, which it opens up before us. It is impossible for someone to experience the *Triodion* and not to grow spiritually."

[3] This passage is from the first ode of the canon of the Pharisee and the Publican (*Lenten Triodion*, 102).

It means to get to know God better, and to establish a relationship with Him that you won't abandon. Are we going to live with God, or, in the end, go our separate ways? Nobody gets married in order to get divorced, but divorces often happen. The same thing occurs with God.

Today we heard the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee (Lk 18.10-14). It speaks of humility. I won't repeat the story to you now, because you all know it perfectly well. But within the larger meaning of the parable, there's something I'd like you to take careful note of. The Pharisee thought he knew God. He believed that he and God were friends. He was, however, mistaken in this belief, and it was rather the other man, the Publican, who was God's friend.

The Pharisee thought he knew God, but he didn't. It's not that easy to know God. But because he faithfully observed the outward rules of religion, he was under the false impression that God was somehow in his debt, that God owed him something. God for him was a kind of accountant, keeping a set of books showing what people owed him and what He owed them. But it's not like that.

The moment the Pharisee said, *I'm not like those other people* (cf. Lk 18.11), he cut himself off from God. Why? Because God is humble, and since the Pharisee felt no need for humility, it follows that he felt no need for God. He knew the law, and the traditions of his faith, but he did not know God.[4]

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[4] Compare St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily on the Publican and the Pharisee* 3: "Why does humility lead up to the heights of righteousness, whereas self-conceit leads down to the depths of sin? Because anybody who thinks he is something great even before God, is rightly abandoned by God, as one who thinks that he does not need His help. Anybody who despises himself, on the other hand, and relies on mercy from above, wins God's sympathy, help, and grace" (*Homilies* 1:10).

The Publican, on the other hand, had no illusions about himself. He was sunk up to his neck in the swamp of his sins. And yet, even though he was awash in the slime of his transgressions, what did he say to God? *Be merciful to me a sinner* (Lk 18.13). And at that moment, in his sinful, suffering, disconsolate heart, he felt certain that he *was justified*, thanks to his humility and the frank acknowledgement of his sinfulness. As the Lord tells us, he *went down to his house justified* (Lk 18.14), which means that God recognized and received him. As a sinner he had been living in darkness, but his humility brought him into the light of paradise and granted him communion with God.[5]

Next Sunday, we shall hear another wonderful parable: the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15.11-32), which also speaks about humility and our return to God. This parable reveals that God is our Heavenly Father, and the founder, builder and Lord of the Church, into which he welcomes all who approach him with compunction, and who ultimately choose God over the things of the world.

On the third Sunday, we will hear the parable about the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgment (Mt 25.31-46). This parable presents us with a vision of Christ enthroned in His glory, and reveals to us that He does not judge us by human standards of justice, but rather by the measure of our humility. For in His own humility, Christ has concealed Himself in the person of the poor, and only those with the spirit of humility are able to stoop down and minister to Him.[6]

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[5] Compare St. Peter of Damascus, *Treasury of Divine Knowledge*: "If I had been as honest as the Publican (cf. Lk 18.13), condemning myself alone and no one else, I too would have received forgiveness of sins from God, especially if I had called upon Him with all my soul as the Publican did" (*Philokalia*, 3:115); and St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily on the Publican and the Pharisee* 15: "Humility is the virtue of the angels . . . (it is) the chariot by which we ascend to God, like those clouds which are to carry up to God those who would dwell for endless ages with Him (cf. 1 Thes 4.17)" (*Homilies*, 2:18).

Thereafter we come to the last Sunday before Lent, called Cheese-Fare Sunday. Having reached the end of this preliminary period of preparation, we begin again at the beginning, with a review of history: how mankind fell, and how, in the end, the God of humility invites us to return, not simply to paradise, but into the very kingdom of heaven.

After the first week of Lent, which begins on the Monday after Cheese-Fare Sunday, we arrive at the First Sunday of Lent. Once again our eyes are opened up to heaven, and we behold *the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man* (Jn 1.51).[7] What Jacob had seen long ago in a dream — *a ladder reaching to heaven, with the angels of God ascending and descending on it* (Gen 28.12) — what the Israelites could only dream about, has now become a reality, revealed to those who seek God in humility.

In each of these Gospel stories, we find the answers to our deepest questions: Who is God? What is God? How is God revealed? To whom does God reveal Himself? These are universal human questions, and thus they are our questions too, and so our theme today is how God is revealed and made known to us.

Of course, there are some people who solve the "problem" of

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[6] Compare St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Texts* 114: "Christ takes on the appearance of each of the poor and assimilates Himself to all of them so that no one who believes in Him will be arrogant towards his fellow being" (*Philokalia*, 4:49).

[7] From the Gospel reading of the First Sunday of Lent: Jn 1.43-51 (*Lenten Triodion*, 311).

God by denying His existence altogether. They say: "God doesn't exist," and think that this facile assertion has somehow put all their problems to rest. According to the Prophet David, however, only superficial people think like this, *for the fool,* he tells us, *says in his heart that There is no God* (Ps 13.1). In his foolishness, the atheist is oblivious to the God Who gives him life and breath and the freedom to say that such a God doesn't exist. And his *foolish heart* says such things in the very presence of God, because God is present everywhere, even to those who don't believe in Him.

In many cases, people who deny the existence of God have never met God. They don't know Who or What God is, and thus what they are denying is an idea of God, or a concept of God, something they heard about God. But none of those things are God. As St. Silouan the Athonite said: "It's one thing to talk about God, and another thing to know Him personally."[8] We must therefore come to know God personally, and this is, as we said, a universal human desire.

Some of us receive faith in God as an inheritance from our parents and grandparents. This faith can be very strong, having deep roots in our soul. In the same way that you inherit certain physical and psychological traits from your parents, you can also inherit faith in God. Others acquire faith through observation and experiences, especially through the experience of suffering.

In both cases, faith can be strengthened by the study of spiritual books, especially the Scriptures and the writings of the Church Fathers. When we read such books, we enter into the experiences of the saints in such a way that what they have becomes ours: their faith becomes our faith. However, you have to be humble enough to sit down and read the Scriptures and the *lives* of the saints, and humility is again required in order to be able to receive what these sacred writings have to offer. Because if you read them in a prideful, intellectual manner, your reading will not be spiritual, but will be restricted by the limited scope of your own ideas. And because we are egotistical and self-centered, we usually do nothing more than project our own ideas onto whatever it is we happen to be reading, the Bible included. Consequently, we do not encounter the Living God, but only the dark idols that engulf the mind.

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[8] Arch. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite* (Essex: Monastery of St. John the Baptist, 1991), 354.

Who, then, knows God and can speak truthfully about Him? Who can tell us how we should believe? Who can illumine our darkness, purge our mind of its idols, and set our souls ablaze with holy fire? *Who will give us wings so that we may fly up and come to rest* on the mountain peaks of the knowledge of God? (cf. Ps 54.7). God Himself. The only person who knows God is God Himself. The Father knows the Son and the Spirit, and they know Him. The Holy Spirit leads us to Christ, and Christ reveals the Father.

I. GOD REVEALED

All human beings retain within themselves a deep memory of the original divine experience. Human nature carries within itself the divine imprint, for it was created *according to the image and likeness of God* (Gen 1.26). And all human nature is one and the same, and thus all of us have within ourselves traces of the Godhead. This is why the first human beings, Adam and Eve, were originally so close to God, speaking to Him as children to a loving father. But mankind fell, and lapsed into idolatry, and over time forgot about these things or interpreted them differently.

Of all the peoples and nations only one maintained a vivid memory of God: the ancient people of Israel. Their memory, moreover, was strengthened by right concepts of God, and both were confirmed by the experience of God's boundless humility, of His long-suffering and gracious condescension toward His people. *Fear not,* God said, *for I am with you. I will strengthen you, I will help you* (Is 41.10). *I have been with you since birth, I carried you from the womb; even to your old age I am God, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have created you, and I will carry you and save you* (Is 46.3-4). *I will bring you up from the land of Egypt, and redeem you from the house of bondage* (cf. Mic 6.3).

In all of these saving deeds, God stoops down to His people. All that the Scriptures say about God's *walking, descending, bending down, being with, helping, bringing to birth, carrying,* and so on, are simply different ways of describing God's gracious condescension. Because man will not bow down to God, God, in His infinite humility, bows down to man. On the night He was betrayed, Christ set aside his garments, and stooped down to wash the feet of a man who would deny him three times (Jn 13.4-6). That's how God was with the people of Israel. That's how He is with everyone.

God, then, has a particular way of acting. There is a certain pattern to His behavior. When we look at the history of God's actions from the beginning of the Old Testament to the end of the New, what do we see? God diminishes Himself. Everywhere and at all times, God reduces Himself; He makes Himself small. He humbles Himself and does whatever is necessary so that we might be saved.

Although God is the creator of the universe, He does not hesitate to reveal Himself by means of his own creations. The sky and the sun are his images, so too the sea and the mountains, and everything that comes between birth and death. In His infinite humility, God condescends to be revealed even by an ass! (Num 22.21-35).

God also reveals Himself in special, symbolic ways, as in, for example, the burning bush (Ex 3.2). Enveloped in fire, the bush that Moses saw at the foot of Mt. Horeb was not consumed by the flames. In this way, Moses learned that God is a burning fire, that God is light, and that He ignites the heart of man without destroying it. The divine fire neither burns nor is consumed, because God is eternal. The burning bush was also a prefiguration of the Mother of God, who, unharmed, received in her womb the fire of divinity.[9]

As a symbol of God we should also remember the ark of the covenant (cf. Ex 25.10-22; Lev 16.2; Num 7.89). For the Jews, this was the privileged locus of God's presence on earth: *There I will meet you,* God told them, *from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark, I will speak with you* (Ex 25.22). Later God's glory came to rest in the temple. *When Solomon had finished building the house of the Lord, the Lord appeared to him and said: 'I have consecrated this house, and put My name there for ever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time'* (1 Kgs 9.1-3).

But the true temple of God, in which *all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell* (Col 1.19) is Jesus Christ, Who, when he said *'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up,' was speaking of the temple of His body* (Jn 2.19-21). Thus the glory of God resides now in the Body of Christ, the Church, where God has *placed His eyes and heart.*

It's as if I had to go away somewhere, and somebody who loves me says: "Don't forget me. We may never see each other again." At that moment, if you could, you'd take out your eyes and your heart, and say: "There you are. That's so I can stay with you, so my heart can love you. So that, wherever I am, my eyes can love you." Of course, I can't do something like that, but God can. And thus He says: "I've left My eyes and My heart here with you. Anyone who wants can rest on My heart, and My eyes will see the tears that anyone wants to shed, so that I can make him a saint in heaven."

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[9] Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 21: "From this we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: The light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth" (Malherbe, 59).

In many and various ways, then, the hidden God *spoke to our fathers* (Heb 1.1), and made known to them the signs of His presence. At the same time, however, He conceals His divinity, the sight of which we could not endure (Ex 33.20).[10] God is concealed, then, with respect to His divine essence, but at the same time present by means of His uncreated energies. Like an electric current or magnetic field, God penetrates and attracts all things.[11] And if these forces of nature are so powerful, and yet invisible, how much more powerful is the invisible God Who created them? Through His uncreated energies, God makes His humble exodus toward us. He *bows down the heavens and descends* (Ps 17.10). He stoops down to us, and warms us like a fire, penetrates us like an electric current that remains with us while never leaving its source.

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[10] Compare St. Proklos of Constantinople, *On the Resurrection*: "How did God appear to those on earth? Was it without human nature? Without the flesh? Nonsense. Our eyes could not bear the direct light of the divinity, neither would the devil dare to wage war on such. Death shudders before the creator, and would not have swallowed up the indigestible essence. Hades trembles before the naked vision of God, and so the divine nature required a covering" (PG 65:792D).

[11] This intriguing metaphor is developed by M. Welker, *Gottes Geist: Theologie der Heiligen Geistes* (Neukirchlichen-Vluyn, 1992), cited in D. Reid, *Energies of the Spirit* (Atlanta, 1997), 133.

In the Old Testament, God *extended His hand from the height of heaven over Judah and over all the inhabitants of Jerusalem* (Zeph 14). In the New Testament, He *bows down the heavens* (Ps 17.10), thrusting them aside *like a curtain* (Ps 103.3), and descends in person. Psalm 17 is a prophecy of the incarnation. *He bows down the heavens.* He stoops down and comes to earth. And as He descends, *thick darkness gathers under His feet* (Ps 17.10), so that His appearance might be concealed, as befits the humble God. *He mounted on the cherubim and flew, He flew upon the wings of the winds* (Ps 17.11). With great speed He hurries to earth, for He greatly desires our salvation. *He sent out from on high and took me; He drew me to Him out of many waters* (Ps 17.7). I was crushed and broken, drowning in a sea of sin, and yet He came even to me. He took me by the hand and snatched me from death.

From the highest place of light and glory, He descends to the bottom of the ocean in order to save a drowning man; indeed, into the very depths of hell, to free the souls that were imprisoned there. And He does this at the cost of His own life, being arrested, mocked, beaten, tortured, and put to a shameful death on a cross. Do you see His extreme humility? *Though He was in the form of God, He emptied Himself, and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.* (Phil 2.6-11).

II. MAN: THE DIVINE IMAGE

In the beginning, God was alone. His existence, of course, was tri-hypostatic: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All joy, love, and peace were His. He had everything and needed nothing. But "He was not content to contemplate Himself."[12] In the excessive abundance of His love, He wanted to share His existence with others, and so created man. And this was an act preceded by untold ages of preparation – untold because they preceded the beginning of time itself. God created the angels to serve mankind, for the angels are *ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation* (Heb 1.14). Then he made the *heavens and the earth* (Gen 1.1), the entire universe, and all that is in them. And when he finally created man, He did so in the greatest humility, having no other thought but to share His joy, His peace, and His blessedness.

What does it mean that *God created man*? (Gen 1.27). What exactly is the relationship between God and man? A great mystery is concealed here, one that is not easy for us to understand. But if you open your heart, God will open your mind, and you'll understand that the creation of man conceals the humility of God. To understand this, it might be helpful to compare it to something similar, to try and find some kind of analogy. In divine matters, however, there can be no real comparisons, there are no analogies that we can apply. And this is why, whenever we *do* make comparisons, we run the risk of falling into error and even heresy.

Let us turn instead to the creation of Adam and Eve as described in the Bible, beginning with the creation of Eve. As you know, God *took a rib from Adam's side* (Gen 2.21), and, having done that, Adam was no longer whole, no longer complete. So what did God do? He immediately remade it and closed the wound without Adam feeling any pain.[13] Adam was now whole again. And as all of this was taking place, it says that *God had caused Adam to fall into a state of ecstasy* (Gen 2.21).

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[12] St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.16: "Now, because the good and transcendentally good God was not content to contemplate Himself, by a superabundance of goodness saw fit that there should be some things to benefit by and participate in His goodness, He brings all things from nothing into being and creates them, both visible and invisible, and man, who is made up of both" (FOTC 37:205).

God did not put Adam to sleep or in a kind of trance, because what God did required Adam's consent. How God respects our freedom! Adam was able to see what was happening, even though he didn't fully understand it. God opened up his side, removed one of his ribs, and from it fashioned a new human being, Eve, *whom God gave to Adam* (Gen 2.23).

When God showed Eve to Adam, he was amazed; completely dumbfounded. At first he thought he was seeing another version of himself, and said, *this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh* (Gen 2.23). It's like seeing your brother or sister, whom you haven't seen in many years, and saying: "But that's me!" But when God said *Let us make a helper for him* (Gen 2.18), Adam realized that there was a mystery here. And thus he said, "I, Adam (*'ysh*), will call her Eve (*'ysha*)," "Eve" being the feminine form of "Adam," as if my name was Paul and I called you Paula. Adam and Eve were one, each being an image of the other, and so were not ashamed of their nakedness, because it's only in the presence of others that our nakedness becomes a source of shame. But they were one flesh, just as we read at the marriage service: *The two shall be one flesh* (Eph 5.31, citing

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[13] Compare St. Theoleptos of Philadelphia, *Texts* 3: "The divine Logos, invoked by the cry of the prayer that rises from within you, lays hold of the noetic power of the intellect as though it were Adam's rib and fills it with divine knowledge; in its place, bringing to perfection our inner state, He confers the gift of virtue" (*Philokalia*, 4:189); cf. above, chap. 7, n. 18.

Gen 2.24). And this is why they were always together, and why there was no hostility between them, *for no man hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it* (Eph 5.29).

When they sinned against God, however, what happened? *They realized that they were naked* and so they *covered themselves up with aprons made of fig leaves* (Gen 3.7). Do you see what happened? The unity that existed between them was broken. Their personalities were divided; they became strangers to each other, and so they *covered themselves* in order to conceal their bodies. And this is what sin does to us: it cuts us into pieces and divides us from our selves and from others. Sin splits people up. It cuts them right down the middle. And thus Adam was ashamed, both before Eve and before God, and went off to hide. God, of course, went to look for him.

Let's turn now to the creation of Adam. *God formed man of dust from the ground* (Gen 2.7). To create man, God made use of material that already existed, and when He was done, He went right up to the man He had made, and with a divine gesture that was wholly befitting to Him, He *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life* (Gen 2.7). At that moment, lifeless matter was infused with life, and not simply biological life, but the very life of God. A handful of dust had become *a living soul* (Gen 2.7), drawing its life from God.

In this we can see the ultimate humility of God, since Adam is essentially God in miniature. It's as if something infinitely vast was reduced to something very small. That's what God did, He created an image of Himself upon which He lavished His own qualities and attributes: He made us like Him, and gave us a share in His divinity.

God dwells within man, as He dwelt in the ark and the temple. Man is thus a living ark and a living temple, in which God is pleased to dwell. Until the moment of the incarnation, when God became a man, there was no act of God greater than the creation of man *according to His image and likeness* (Gen 1.26). In the same way that Adam looked at Eve and saw himself, so too does God look at man and see His own image, reflected back to Him. And in the same way that Adam and Eve were inseparable, so too is God joined to us, because together we are one person, one God: we by grace, He by nature. We are gods made of earth, into whom the God of Heaven has breathed His own life, and so we are one, as an image is one with its archetype.

Because we are His image, God does not abandon us, even when we sin. Although we are prideful, He is always humble. Although we often forget Him, His thoughts are always about us. If we reject Him, he never ceases to love us, in the same way that a mother loves her children, for they are a part of her. A mother loves her little children, and God loves His little gods.

And when the little god sinned, God wept. God wept! But Adam ran off and hid. What did God do then? He humbled Himself. He acted like nothing was wrong. He approached quietly, feigning ignorance, hoping gradually to come around to the subject of what had happened. *Adam*, He calls out, *where are you*? (Gen 3.9). No answer. Just a trembling behind the trees. But God finds him, and says: "Why didn't you come out to meet me? Why didn't you come running to see me, as you always do? What's the matter? What's that you're wearing?" By this time, however, Adam had thought up an excuse, and blurted out: *The woman that* You *gave me, she deceived me* (Gen 3.12). It's as if he had said: "This is all *your* fault, God. This all happened because of the woman that *you* gave me." No humility here. And it was Adam's utter lack of humility that sealed the verdict of death against him.[14]

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[14] See above, chap. 8, n. 5.

To all of this, God said something like: "The woman that I gave you? Do you mean Eve? But you and Eve are one person, aren't you? How, then, can you blame this on her and say that you had nothing to do with it? How can you divide your self, your nature, in this way? How did Eve become a separate person? Wasn't it you who said she was *bone of your bones* and *flesh of your flesh*? Didn't you call her by your own name? When did the one become two? How were you separated?"

Despite the fall of man, God did not, and never will, abandon the human race. Unlike the woman in pain who forgot her baby at the dentist's office, God will never abandon us. Through His prophet, He tells us: *Even if a mother forgets her child, I shall not forget you* (Is 49.15), because you are a god that I have made.

So this is our God! *I have stretched out My hands all the day long to a disobedient and contrary people* (Is 65.2). We have no time for God. We're too busy. We don't think about Him because we're tired. But *all the day long*, He *stretches out His hands* and entreats us. *All the day long*, Christ, the Great High Priest, stands with His *hands outstretched* on the cross, on which the little gods have nailed Him. And from that lofty vantage point, He supplicates His heavenly Father on our behalf. Though we crucify Him every day, God prays for us! That, my beloved, is humility.

III. GOD AS MAN

We've seen what God is. He is the Holy One. And I am His *image and likeness* (Gen 1.26). I am a little god. And after centuries of stretching His helping hand down to us from Heaven, God Himself came down, *became man, and dwelt among us* (cf. Jn 1.14). God entered the mud to find man, the priceless pearl, and to raise him up, and grant him the knowledge of God.

The Son of God does not come in symbols, or in clouds or still breezes. Instead, He removed his *garments of light* (cf. Ps 103.2) and clothed Himself in the garments of human nature. Long ago, God made man a little god. Now, God Himself becomes man, and this is beyond anything that man could ever have imagined or hoped for.

Until now, God built bridges, so that He might cross over to us, and we to Him. Now He abolishes all distances, removes all boundaries, and comes to dwell with us forever. Unable to endure the loss of His creation, He sets aside His unspeakable glory and humbles Himself, definitively taking on our condition.[15]

And His whole life was an ongoing self-abasement, an unending self-emptying, from the moment of His conception until His death and burial and beyond. In the extreme humility of His descent, God did not stop at the clouds. Neither did His journey end on earth. He went all the way to hell. In His extreme humility, He descends to the extremity of man's damnation, and *stretches forth His hands* to those *sitting in the darkness and the shadow of death* (cf. Lk 1.79). In *stretching forth His hands*, He embraces all: those who loved Him, and those who hated Him; those who stood by Him throughout His life, and those who denied Him. He extends His open hands to all, so that anyone who wants can take hold of Him, and He will pull them out of Hell.[16] Lower than this, there is no place for man or God to go.

In light of God's descent, everything has changed. When the highest entered the lowest, when God entered the realm of hell, everything there was turned upside down. The Devil was defeated. Death yielded to life. Darkness was swallowed up by light. Fallen man ascended into heaven. In union with Christ, human nature now sits on the throne of God, being filled with the Holy Spirit. God has descended, and reduced Himself for our sake, while redeemed humanity has become a great mass, exalted, so high as to surpass heaven itself. In his sermon on humility, St. Basil says that "from a state of nothingness, man has expanded into the heavens."[17] And all of this can be ours, if only we humble ourselves.

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[15] The fall of man provokes, not divine anger, but God's mercy and compassion, on which see: St. Athanasios, *On the Incarnation* 6-10 (SC 199:282-302).

[16] See chap. 1, n. 23.

Having completed His work, Christ has returned to the heavens. But He remains inseparably united to us, and has given us His Spirit of power and sanctity. He has also given us Holy Communion, which is the continuation of His bodily presence on earth, though in a humble form. Being united to the flesh, God communicates with the flesh, and we, receiving God, are raised to the heights of heaven.

But to commune truly with the humble God, we must be humble. This is why Christ says: *He who humbles himself will be exalted* (Mt 23.12). What does *exalted* mean here? It means that such a person will attain to the knowledge of God. It doesn't mean being glorified in some abstract way, or being established in a comfortable place in heaven, still less does it mean that men will honor and praise us. It means that the Holy Spirit will reveal all things to our hearts, as long as we humble ourselves and bow our heads to God.

God decreases, but we increase. In humility we ascend to God. We come to know Him and His ways.

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[17] *Homily on Humility* 6 (FOTC 9:483; trans. modified).

IV. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

In the person of Christ, we can see that humility is a quality of God, a feature of His *hypostasis.* God is not God if He is not humble. And neither can I be like god unless I am humble. Indeed, without humility, I'll become a demon. Humility must therefore be a condition of my being. I must embrace humility, knowing that, when I live in humility, I live in God.

What is humility? It is, as we have been saying, the life of God, the form of divine life, and we see this clearly in the life of Christ, who descended from heaven to extreme lowliness. In everything that concerns Him we find lessons of humility. He was born in a cave, and placed not in a crib but in a trough. He grew up in the house of a poor carpenter. He was subject to His mother and Joseph. He was taught, and applied Himself to lessons He did not need to learn. He accepted baptism from the hands of John His servant. When He was slandered and arrested and threatened with death, He did not make use of His marvelous powers (Mt 26.53). He subjected Himself to temporal authority. He was brought before the high priest as if he were a common criminal, and then led to the governor. He silently bore insults and false accusations, and in silence He submitted to His sentence, although with one word He could have refuted the false witnesses. He was spat upon by the lowest and vilest of men. He surrendered Himself to death on the cross, the most shameful form of death known to man. From His birth to the end of His life, He displayed humility in all things.[18] And this is why St. Isaac the Syrian says that "humility is the raiment of divinity."[19]

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[18] Ibid. (FOTC 9:483-484).

[19] *Homily* 77: "Humility is the raiment of the Godhead. The Word Who became

Following the example of Christ, humility is the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian life, and the foundation for our relation with God. The more humble we are, the more God will reveal Himself to us. And the more we know about God, the more humble we become. We need all the virtues, but without humility they achieve nothing. Even fasting, prayer, and love itself can do nothing without humility. But when prayer and fasting are joined with humility, we become the companion of God, and enter the divine environment in such a way that, as we've said, we become gods ourselves.

We must not seek to know God, or anything else from or about God. We must rather humble ourselves. God will then come to us and give us that which we desire. If you don't humbly acknowledge your spiritual poverty, you won't be able to ask God to give you the treasures of His grace. But through humility and prayer, God pours out the riches of His knowledge, granting us communion in His own life.

But rather than being filled with the knowledge of God, we normally live with a void at the center of our existence. There is a hole in our heart, into which crawl all the cares and worries of life. We work ourselves to exhaustion in pursuit of success and happiness. We struggle to improve our position in society, to attend the right schools, and move in the right kinds of circles. But the void within us is always on the increase. Nothing in the world can fill it, because it can only be filled by God.

But we mustn't despair, because despair itself is a sign of pride, and thus will take us even further away from the humble God.

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man clothed Himself in it, and therewith spoke to us in our body" (*Homilies*, 381).

Avoid that road. Resist temptation, struggle, take up your cross, and God will come and find you, wherever you are. As He did to Adam, He'll ask you where you are, what's happened, and extend His hand to you. You will awake from your state of spiritual confusion, and you'll see Him wishing to draw you toward greater knowledge of Him.

Then, the empty place within you will become like the ark of the covenant. It will become a holy place in which God will dwell. Though your heart was a tomb in which Christ was dead, it will now be filled with light, with angels sitting on either side of it, as the resurrected Christ comes to meet you. For your part, you need to endure a little darkness, and struggle against temptations; to hold fast when you feel like despairing. But don't despair. God will come.

Another problem we have is that we tire easily. When it comes to worldly pursuits, our energy knows no bounds, but we grow weary very quickly when God is concerned. Those who chase after wealth or glory never tire of doing so. Others pursue sensual pleasures, tirelessly chasing after sin. But even the thought of running after God leaves us feeling fatigued. We get tired, and then we forget, and then we're led astray by the world. But then something happens to make us think of God, and so we make promises and resolutions, but, after a little while, forget all about them, and so it goes round and round. But think about the material things you're chasing after and accumulating in great piles: they're all banal, fleeting, and utterly without meaning.

If you are able to see this, then sink the eyes of your soul deep into your heart — be it ever so twisted and perverted — and ask God to take over. Hovering over the chaos of your life, God will shine His light (cf. Gen 1.3), and the abyss of hell that was in you will be transformed into heaven. God is humble, and will not shrink from entering into your sinful heart in order to rescue you from sin. That's God! And only God can do this. No one and nothing else in this world can raise you from your state of death. There is no other cure for your wound, no other remedy for what ails you.

In whatever you do, choose the path of humility, and God will glorify you. In that way, you will travel on a safe and sure road, having angels as your companions, and quickly arrive at the house of God. Christ will acknowledge you as His own disciple, and shall grant you His peace, for He says: *Learn from me, because I am meek and humble of heart, and you shall find rest for your souls* (Mt 11.29).

11. THE THRONE OF GOD*

By the grace of God, we have now entered the period of the *Triodion*, which will lead us by stages to the heart of the ecclesiastical year.[1] The next four weeks will be a preparation for Great Lent, and ultimately for Holy Week, when we shall suffer and be buried with the Lord. After that, together with all the saints and all creation, we will joyfully celebrate the Lord's glorious Resurrection, along with our own spiritual renewal.

Anyone who has developed a strong, spiritual connection with the feasts of the Church will surely cry out in exclamation when, on the First Sunday of Lent, he hears the words: *You will see the heavens open and the angels of the Lord ascending and descending on the Son of Man* (Jn 1.52). This passage from the Gospel of John provides me with the starting point for my talk today.

If we pay close attention to the Gospel readings throughout the period of the *Triodion* and Great Lent, we will see that, in each of them, Christ is revealed to us in new and different ways. The Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, and that of the Prodigal Son, present us with the humility and paternal embrace of the Son of God. As such they constitute a revelation of God and a source of knowledge about Him. Meat-Fare Sunday reveals to us the Son of Man in His glory, seated on His throne and judging the nations. Cheese-fare Sunday speaks to us of the new life of communion in Christ.

As you can see, Christ reigns supreme in all things. But even though all things reveal His glory to us, man's tragedy is that he cannot see with his eyes the God Whom he desires. We seek God in our prayers. Each of us, in his own way, as much as he can, and by whatever means he has at his disposal, endeavors to see God. In the end, however, we must make our own the words which say: *I sought Him and did not find Him. I called upon Him and He did not hearken to me* (Song 3.1). This is the cry and the lamentation of our hearts, because we don't see God, or obtain from Him a response to our prayers.

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* An address delivered to the "Three Hierarchs" Association, in Volos, on 26 February, 1986.

[1] On the *Triodion*, see above, chap. 10, n. 1.

What are we to do? Who would ever be satisfied with never seeing or knowing the person he loved? Who would ever marry a person he had not first met, and gotten to know? How can our hearts espouse Christ if we don't see Him anywhere?[2]

This is why we feel like the bride in the Song of Songs, and join her in her resolve: *I shall arise and go about the whole city looking for him. I will search the market places, I shall run through the streets and I shall seek him whom my soul has loved* (Song 3.2). We know that God is within us, because we know that He is everywhere. But we don't see Him, we don't hear Him, and it is hard to live as if we had neither eyes nor ears.

To be sure, we know that *no one has ever seen God* (Jn 1.18) in His nature, for *no one may see Him and live* (Ex 33.20). In His nature, God is absolutely transcendent and inaccessible, utterly beyond all things that we are able to know or imagine. He alone is not like all the other things that we know, for He is not a thing, not an object we can grasp with our minds.[3] And yet, my dear friends, the Sacred Scriptures are full of testimonies and signs of God's living, active presence among men. Let us then consider a few of these passages and see how the infinite God is manifested in time and space to finite man.

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[2] These questions are considered above, in chap. 7.

[3] See above, chap. 1, n. 13.

Speaking through the Prophet Hosea, God says: *I have multiplied visions and at the hands of the prophets I have been represented* (Hos 12.10). God has revealed Himself in visions; He has given Himself over to prophets and seers, to be seen by them in various forms and likenesses. And in these forms and likenesses the prophets recognized God and passed on to us that which they saw and venerated. God gave Himself into their *hands* and allowed Himself to *be represented* by them. And He appeared not just once, or under a single form, but many times, *in multiple visions*, and thus the invisible God rendered Himself visible through symbolic images and representations.[4]

We can say, then, that, without departing from or in any way altering His inaccessible essence, God graciously condescended to human weakness, and appeared in forms and representations that were intelligible and familiar, in order to raise us to full knowledge of His divinity. Thus we have the experience of God's presence among us, and the sense that we have seen that which is beyond vision.

I. THE THRONE

Perhaps the most prominent vehicle of God's manifestation on earth is His *throne*, which He occupies in order to visit His people.

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[4] "Symbolic" not in the weak sense of mere metaphorical association, but in the sense defined by St. Dionysios the Areopagite, on which see Eric Perl, "Symbol, Sacrament, and Hierarchy in Saint Dionysios the Areopagite," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39 (1994): 311-356. See also St. Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 3.14-22 (Gendle, 75-80).

Images of God as a king seated upon His throne can be found throughout Scripture, including the Gospel for Meat-Fare Sunday (Mt 25.31-46), which we mentioned a moment ago. This is an unparalleled account of the Second Coming, when the Lord will appear *seated on His throne of glory* (Mt 25.31). All of us are familiar with this passage, having read and heard it many times. It may be the case, however, that the meaning of Christ's *throne of glory* has escaped our attention, and thus it will be worthwhile to consider it carefully.

Let's begin, then, by turning to the vision of the Prophet Isaiah, who, beholding the glory of God, said: *I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne* (Is 6.1). These are not simply a series of words spoken by the prophet. In fact they are not really words at all, but rather revelatory *actions.* They are not projections of the human imagination, but rather the self-expression of God, revealing how and in what manner He is among us. From the moment we come to know God, we understand that, day and night, wherever we are, God is there too, and He will be present to us wherever we go.

The Prophet Ezekiel saw virtually the same things in his vision: *I saw the heavens opened and I saw visions of God . . . I saw the appearance of a sapphire stone, and upon it was the likeness of a throne* (Ezek 1.1, 26). The prophet tells us he saw *visions,* which means that he saw God in many ways, under many forms, and through many representations. It's as if he's saying: "God presented Himself to me by means of a thousand ruses, so that I might gain a true idea of what He was, and transmit that knowledge to His people." Like Isaiah, Ezekiel also beheld the heavenly throne, which for both prophets is linked to a vision of the Heavenly Temple, of which Solomon's Temple was an earthly copy. And if the throne in the earthly temple *stood elevated on six steps* (1 Kgs 10.19), it was in imitation of its heavenly archetype, the Throne of the Lord, which is *high and exalted* (Is 6.1), located *above the firmament, over the heads of the four living creatures* (Ezek 1.26).[5]

Now if God's throne itself is beyond the heavens — the bottom of it, in a sense, being just barely visible beyond the height of the heavens — then we can understand how exalted God Himself must be.[6] God is beyond the heavens. He is not part of the created, material order. Neither is He part of the created, spiritual order. He is just as much beyond mind as He is beyond matter. As such He is visible neither to the eyes of the body nor to those of the soul. He is not like anything you have ever seen or thought or imagined. He is utterly different from anything the human mind can conceive. This is why the prophets saw Him in *visions and manifestations*, and why they spoke of Him only *in representations, likenesses, and parables* (cf. Hos 12.10).

God, then, transcends all things, and thus the throne is an appropriate image of His absolute majesty and sovereignty. The foundations of God's throne are far beyond the earth, its bases are higher than the heavens, its lowermost steps transcend the immaterial spheres of the angels. Indeed, not only is God Himself beyond the highest reaches of human knowledge, but even His throne of glory cannot be known, for it is fashioned of divine fire and utterly beyond all human comprehension. This is why St. John Chrysostom says that "even the place where God sits is incomprehensible and inaccessible."[7] He says that "God's throne is unapproachable, for *God dwells in incomprehensible light* (1 Tim 6.16)." And this is why, in the vision of Isaiah, "the *seraphim stretch forth their wings and cover their faces*: because they cannot endure the sparkling flashes or the lightning which shines from the throne."[8]

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[5] Compare St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Isaiah* 1.4: "The *throne* represents divine transcendence and power over all creation . . . that God's throne is *high and lofty* does not mean that it is located somewhere high in the sky, for that would be utterly foolish. God's throne is *high and lofty* because it transcends, not simply all material creation, but all spiritual creation as well" (PG 70:171B).

[6] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Isaiah*: "This was not a vision of God as He exists in Himself, but in a form which the prophet could see, for God lowered Himself to the level where human weakness was able to rise" (PG 56:68C).

The King of creation is beyond all creation. But because He *is* the king, because He has a throne at all, it means He is the Lord, and has subjects. Thus the invisible God, the transcendent God, mingles with His people and is involved in their dealings and affairs. He hears their pleas and petitions, their demands for justice and the anguish of their hearts. And though He is the infinite God, in His infinite love He becomes quite small so that He can be loved by His people.[9] He rules the world from on high, but does not insist on his royal prerogatives; He *does not count* divine transcendence *a thing to be grasped at* (cf. Phil 2.7), but rather descends below, humbles Himself, and becomes one with His people.

In these passages, as if in a portrait, the character of God and His attributes are clearly depicted. How great is our God! He limits in Himself things that are unlimited, so that He can give them to us within our own proper limits. Things impossible he renders possible, so that we might contain them within ourselves, and feel that God is uniquely ours.

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[7] *First Homily on Isaiah* (PG 56.101).

[8] St. John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 3 (FOTC 72:100-101).

[9] Compare Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*: "Isaiah beheld the *Only-Begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father* (Jn 1.18), descending by degrees from His own proper magnitude, diminishing Himself, making Himself visible and comprehensible to men" (PG 24:121D).

The image of God seated on an exalted throne also tells us that He has no rivals, no one threatens Him, He sees no one as an enemy. He alone is the Victor, He alone reigns supreme over all. In the same way, He is beyond all vanity and corruption, beyond all that is small and self-concerned, the very things, in other words, which torment us and cause us to forget God, to lose sight of His throne.

This, then, is our God: exalted above all creation yet nevertheless fully present to the most humble of His creatures. Though His glory fills the universe, we are able to contain Him in our hearts, and be contained by Him.

Let us now consider another aspect of God's throne. Ezekiel does not say that he "saw a throne," but rather that he *saw the likeness of a throne* (Ezek 1.26). And Daniel, who also had a vision of the heavenly throne, says that *it was like a flame of fire* (Dan 7.9). Why does Ezekiel say that it was the *likeness* of a throne? Why does Daniel say that it was *like* fire, or light? In part because they want to indicate that the throne of God is not like anything else. It is exclusively and uniquely what it is. In this respect, God's throne and God Himself would seem to share the same qualities or attributes, and this is completely appropriate and true, because God's throne is not ultimately something other than God Himself. It is God's *unapproachable light* (1 Tim 6.16). It is the way God reveals Himself by accommodating what He reveals to the weakness of vision of those who behold Him.[10]

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[10] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 3: "God

Since the throne of God is an expression of the unlimited, infinite nature of God, it is at once here on earth, beyond the heavens, and present in the depths of the human heart. Is there a place where God is not? No. Then neither is there a place where His throne is not firmly established. But even though God's throne knows no limits, this does not mean that it lacks a center. St. John the Theologian saw the *throne of the Lamb, in the midst of the Heavenly Jerusalem* (Rev. 22.1), which means "in the midst of the Church." And thus it is only in the Church that we can *draw near to the throne of grace with boldness* (Heb 4.16), and so be spared from *the throne from which roars forth the river of fire* (Dan 7.10). For from the *throne of the lamb flows* — not a river of fire — but *the river of the water of life, bright as crystal* (Rev 22.1).

In other passages of Scripture, the throne designates heaven. And when heaven is mentioned, it signifies the throne. This is to show us that when we look at the heavens, we are to understand them as the dwelling place of God. And if heaven is God's throne, the earth is naturally his *footstool*, as Isaiah says (Is 66.1; cf. Acts 7.49; Mt 5.35). Wherever I tread, therefore, I know that there, too, tread the feet of God. Do you understand what this means? If someone tells me that something is charged with electric current, and I go ahead and touch it, I know I'll be electrocuted. Here the prophet is telling me that the earth is God's *footstool*, so I know that I am placing my feet where He has placed His. And since we are both standing in the same place, then we must be together, present to

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condescends whenever He is not seen as He is, but in the way one incapable of beholding Him is able to look upon Him. In this way God reveals Himself by accommodating what He reveals to the weakness of vision of those who behold Him" (FOTC 72:101-102).

each other, and earth becomes heaven, the *garden* of God Himself, where He is pleased to *walk in the cool of the day* (cf. Gen 3.8).

Another aspect of God's throne is that it is surrounded by the highest orders of the angels: the seraphim and the cherubim (cf. Is 6.1; Ezek 1.5; Dan 7.10).[11] So close, in fact, is the relationship between these angels and the throne, that they are often said to *be* the throne, as in the prayer of the Cherubic Hymn: "You, O God, are the King of Israel, the Lord of the Seraphim, and are mounted on the throne of the Cherubim." In other words, the cherubim are never absent from the presence of God. What are the cherubim? They are superior, bodiless spiritual beings, beyond our understanding, whose presence indicates the presence of God. We know that all creation is brimming with cherubim, and that, with each of them, the Godhead is, in a sense, indivisibly broken up and distributed.

In a fiery circle around the throne of the cherubim are the ranks of the seraphim. All together they are beyond counting, which is why Daniel says that *a thousand thousand served Him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him* (Dan 7.10). Standing like a choir around the throne, the seraphim *call out one to another and say: 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts: heaven and earth are filled with His glory'* (Is 6.3). And the *glory* that they praise is the uncreated energies of God, which pour forth from the throne and flood the world, flowing even to us and filling our hearts. If the cherubim indicate God's presence, the seraphim bring God still closer, because they sing to us of His passage, His exodus towards each one of us.[12]

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[11] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Isaiah*: "Just as in the court of earthly kings, the royal throne is surrounded by the highest ranking dignitaries, so too do the heavenly powers circle round the heavenly throne, on account of their overwhelming virtue" (PG 56:60B); and Eusebius of Caesarea, *Commentary on Isaiah*: "The seraphim surround the divine throne in the manner of a crown encircling a great king" (PG 24:125A).

God, then, *is seated on a high and exalted throne* (Is 6.1). But does God really sit? And after that, does He stand up? No. God neither sits down nor stands up. These are postures for bodily beings. Neither can God be encompassed or enclosed by a throne, because the divinity cannot be circumscribed by limits.[13] These things, however, are the expressions of an unalterable truth, namely: that God is permanently, unshakably established in absolute power, peace and serenity.[14] Through the *likeness* of the throne, God tells us: "Don't worry. I am the eternal and the permanent. See how stable, and assured, and comfortable I am on this throne. See how peaceful and serene I am, sitting here ready listen to you. I'm in no hurry. I won't get tired. I won't protest, or get up and leave you here alone. I'm sitting here, and patiently waiting for you, my child."

The throne manifests the patience and forbearance of God. No sooner do we want Him, then there He is, entirely present and entirely turned toward us. Thus the throne where God sits is a symbol of the fact that God is mine and yours. It reveals that He is at the ready, waiting for us. And we will have Him for as long as the cherubim and the seraphim continue to exist. And they will exist forever.

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[12] On the divine "exodus," see above, chap. 1, n. 18. For a related passage on the seraphim and cherubim, see above, chap. 9, pp. 276-277.

[13] These are points emphasized by virtually all the patristic commentators on Is 6.1; see, for example, St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Isaiah*: "God does not sit, for that is a bodily posture. Neither does He sit in a throne, since He is uncircumscribable, being present in all places and filling all things. This is therefore an act of divine condescension to human vision" (PG 56:68D).

[14] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Isaiah*: "To be 'sitting' is a symbol of solidity, permanence, certainty, immutability, and duration without end" (PG 56:59D); and St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Isaiah*: "That God is said to be *sitting* indicates certainty, fixity in identity, and duration in the good" (PG 70:171).

The throne has yet another side to it, another dimension of meaning, which reminds us that God is the God of judgment and righteousness.[15] Although God does not intrude upon our freedom, He will nevertheless call us to account for all that we have done in our lives. This is why Daniel says that, before the throne, *the court sat in judgment and the books were opened* (Dan 7.10). And this is why the Creed says that Christ will "come again to judge the living and the dead." And these are things that we shall hear repeated in various ways on Meat-Fare Sunday.[16]

We need, then, to add the truth of justice to the truth of what a moment ago we called patience and forbearance. Those are indeed qualities of God, but as the Psalmist says, *Thy throne, O God, is made up of justice. Justice is the preparation and the basis of Your throne* (Ps 88.15; 96.2). But to this the Psalmist immediately adds: *Mercy and truth shall go before His face.* In His desire to save the world, God holds back His judgment, and gives us instead His

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[15] St. John Chrysostom comments extensively on the throne as a symbol of eschatological judgement, primarily by identifying the throne of Is 6.1 with the throne of Dan 7.10 (cf. PG 56:69BD).

[16] See, for example, the first *sticheron* from the vespers: "When Though shalt come, O righteous Judge, to execute just judgment, seated on Thy throne of glory, a river of fire will draw all men amazed before Thy judgment-seat; the powers of heaven will stand beside Thee, and in fear mankind will be judged according to the deeds that each has done. Then spare us, Christ, in Thy compassion, with faith we entreat Thee, and count us worthy of Thy blessings with those that are saved" (*Lenten Triodion*, 150).

mercy and truth, His serenity, love, and gentleness of heart. *Before His face shall go His mercy and truth*, which is to say that He unleashes the hounds of His love: His divine energies. *Your mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life* (Ps 22.6). His mercy will hunt us down. Wherever we may be, whatever we may be doing: sitting, sleeping, keeping vigil, sinning, thinking, talking, God sends out His mercy at that very moment.

And when will judgment come? When the hunt is over. When God's mercy and grace have pursued us and taken us captive, softened our hearts, moved us deeply, and made us think of nothing but Him. We catch a glimpse of this in the iconography of the Second Coming of the Lord. Have you ever noticed that, within the very center of these images there is an empty throne? This is the throne of Christ, but Christ isn't there. The throne is either empty, or has the Gospel on it. That is a symbol of God's love. How? Christ is absent from the throne at which we will be judged, as if He's telling us: "I'm not finished with you. I'm not ready to sit on my throne, pick up the gavel, and pass sentence. I'm still roaming the streets, your houses, your hearts, hoping to find you, so that you are not lost forever." The *books*, as Daniel says, *are opened*, but God does not wish to close them until our names are inscribed therein, *for if anyone's name is not found written in the book of life, he will be thrown into the lake of fire* (Rev 20.15).

This is why *all judgment has been given to Christ, for He is the Son of Man* (Jn 5.27). Why did the Father give the judgment to the Son rather than to Himself? Because Christ, Who is the Son of God, is also *the Son of Man*. And as such He understands us, He feels for us, having lived, labored, suffered, wept, and died as we do. Like us He grew weary, felt sleepy, and got hungry; this is why He is the One Who will judge us, and this is also why He delays the judgment: *because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted* (Heb 2.18).

The throne, then, belongs both to God the Father and Christ the *slaughtered lamb* (Rev 5.6), Who "sits at the right hand of the Father." And this is exactly what the prophets saw: the *likeness of man seated upon the divine throne* (cf. Ezek 1.26; Dan 7.13), in order to show us that there, on the throne, sits not only the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but our human nature, too.

God did not simply create the earth for man to live on. He made a place for us on His own throne, where we can sit at ease. This is why Christ, Whom the prophets beheld as the *likeness of man, sat down at the right hand of God* (Col 3.1): so that we, the human nature with which Christ clothed Himself, can also be seated there with Him. In this way, human nature becomes a partaker of the heavenly throne, and all that it stands for, since *God in Christ has made us His sons and heirs by grace* (cf. Rom 8.17).

The first human being to sit on the throne of God was the Mother of God. And this was only fitting for a woman who, during her life, was herself the "living throne of God," the "fiery throne of God," the very "cherubic throne" itself, and "More Spacious than the Heavens," inasmuch as she contained God.[17] She who had freely given her own body to be the dwelling place, the throne of the divinity, is now enthroned within God forever. And to the extent that we allow God to enter our lives, He will offer the same throne to us. Through the incarnate Christ and His mother, who share the same flesh, the whole of human nature sat on the throne of God. This is, then, yet another symbol of the throne: the honor which God has given to humanity! I'm a confused and troubled sinner, yet Christ and I have been placed on an equal footing before the Father!

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[17] Most of these images are taken from the canon of the Akathist Hymn. The final epithet is the title of the monumental image of the Virgin placed in the eastern apse, over the sanctuary.

This is the nature of our heavenly calling: we have been given the right to the throne of Christ, to be enthroned at His side. And this is no less than what He promises us in the book of Revelation: *To him who conquers will I grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on His throne* (Rev 3.21). Do you hear what He says? *With Me, on My throne*, as though we were one. The throne, then, is the symbol of our own glory together with the glory of Christ. When we consider the glory of Christ, let us remember the glory that God has also prepared for us.

We read that there are *twelve thrones above for the Apostles* (cf. Mt 19.28), and another *twenty-four for the Elders* in the book of Revelation (Rev 4.4). And like the cherubim and seraphim, there will be *a great multitude that no one could number . . . standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with branches of palms in their hands* (Rev 7.9). We shall be an innumerable host with Christ. Each one of us with Christ, and each one of us bearing the palms of victory in our hands. We long merely to see Christ, but how much more will be revealed to our eyes!

Is there a scene more beautiful than the eschatological triumph of Christ? What greater thing could we imagine for ourselves? For Christ, Who is both the Lamb and the Shepherd, will gather his people together, *and He will shepherd them, and lead them, and God shall wipe away every tear from every eye* (Rev 7.17). Where will our pain be then? Where will our problems be, since the Lord Himself will guide us? Where will our sins be when we stand before the *throne of mercy*? We need only *stand firm until He comes* (cf. Rev

2.25). To *stand firm*, that is, in the Body of the Church; to *stand firm* in prayer and vigilance; to *stand firm* in our rejection of the world and its vanity and corruption, which means to keep our eyes fixed firmly on God.

II. THE HEAVENLY COURT

In the time that remains, let's take a quick look *around* the throne, at the heavenly court. Can there be a king without a court? To the court, then.

Among God's chief courtiers and heavenly officials are, as we said before, the seraphim, who stand round the throne, with their vast wings in perpetual motion, sending forth a great, rustling noise, which Scripture says is like *the voice of many waters* (Ezek 1.24). What is the significance of the noise made by their wings? It shows that God is perpetually active, perpetually in motion, perpetually running to us. He never rests. This is why God's throne appeared to Ezekiel as a great chariot, rushing through the clouds, at one moment ascending into heaven, and at the next descending to the earth (cf. Ezek 1.4-28).

Ezekiel describes many other features of the heavenly court, as does Isaiah, and St. John in the book of Revelation, passages from which we have already looked at. But unlike a hall of ceremonies and state functions, the court of God is a place where God is *worshipped*, and thus has the character of a sacred temple. The worship of God in His heavenly court was imaged in the liturgy of the tabernacle, and, afterwards, in the temple of Solomon. Now if you want to see the most magnificent image of the exalted heavenly court of God, you have only to look at our daily worship, as conducted in our churches. The earthly liturgy is an exact copy of its heavenly counterpart. The Church is the *Holy City, the Jerusalem on high, coming down out of heaven from God* (Rev 21.10).

And this is why the ancient church placed the bishop's throne in the apse behind the sanctuary, so that the whole liturgy would unfold before the bishop's throne, which represented the throne of Christ. Indeed all things in the church — the altar, the icons, the lights, the movements, the hymns, the chanting — none of these things are conventional acts, but rather God-bearing realities which have their place in the liturgy that unfolds before the divine throne. The moment you enter an Orthodox Church, and especially when you participate in the liturgy, you know that God is there, you sense that everything there *has come down out of heaven from God.*

The Jews did not doubt that their liturgy had been given to them by God, for the same God Who commanded that *there be light* (Gen 1.3) also commanded that *you shall make a tabernacle with ten curtains, and an ark, and two cherubs of gold*, and all the rest (cf. Ex 26.1, 25.1). God was with them, present to them, in and through their sacred worship. They had no doubt that God dwelt within the Holy of Holies. Christian liturgy is simply the fulfillment and continuation of the worship of God established long ago by God Himself.

Everything, then, in the Church is a sign that points to God; everything is a vehicle of His presence and grace. And it is in and through the worship of the Church that God's grace is *poured out on all flesh* (Act 2.17). In the Church, grace settles on the sons and daughters of men, and makes them sons and daughters of God. In each of us, the Son of God reiterates the mystery of His incarnation, deigning to be born within the dark cave of the heart.[18]

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[18] Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Various Texts* 8: "The divine Logos, who once for all was born in the flesh, always in His compassion desires to be born in spirit in those who desire Him" (*Philokalia*, 2:165), and the passages cited above, chap. 1, n. 19.

Solomon's Temple was equipped with a *great ivory throne, overlaid with the finest gold* (cf. 1 Kg 10.18), which we mentioned earlier. But we, too, are "thrones" of God, dwelling places of the divinity, which is why we must be pure and incorrupt, like precious ivory, through and through. And likewise we must be completely covered with the gold of prayer, action, and contemplation, and be radiant with the anointings of divine light. And these things must be so because it is not possible for us to be absent from the throne and chariot of God.

Consider how Ezekiel describes the throne of God and the cherubim. He says that the base of the throne, its legs, as it were, are formed by the cherubim, who thus enable the throne to fly through the heavens like a chariot. And even though we are now at the very heights of heaven, surrounded by throngs of fiery angels, the prophet draws our attention to a remarkable detail: *Under their wings is a human hand* (Ezek 1.8). Wherever God is, we find His throne. And wherever we find His throne, we find the host of angels. But now we find something else, which seems to be an equally irreducible part of God's presence: the human element. And this is at once a reference to Christ and to us. God cannot imagine Himself without us, so how can we, then, imagine ourselves without or apart from Him? It's impossible, as I said, for us to be absent from the throne and the chariot. The meaning of the throne is now complete: wherever God is, He has us with Him. Wherever there are cherubim and seraphim, there, too, are we.

Yes, my dear friends, the throne of God is everywhere, and, above all, it is present within us. God has made us His throne, so that He can be with us always.

12. WE HAVE FOUND PARADISE*

The hymns that we chant just before the start of Great Lent lament the loss of paradise. They present us with the figure of Adam, who was stripped of the garments of glory woven for him by God. In one of these hymns, Adam, exiled from paradise, strikes up a lament, and cries: "I shall never more see the Lord, my God and Maker, for now I return to the earth from which I was taken. O merciful and compassionate Lord, have mercy on me, for I am fallen."[1]

In the midst of his suffering, however, Adam could not have imagined that such a terrible fall would prove to be the greatest blessing. It would have been even more difficult for him to imagine that the damage he had done to human nature would become the cause for his descendants to meet God on earth, more so than Adam had done in paradise.

In Orthodox monasteries, prior to the start of any service, we strike a large, wooden plank, known as the *talanton*, in such a way as to reproduce the name of Adam. The two syllables of the name "Adam," in other words, provide the basic beat by which the *talanton* is rhythmically and repeatedly struck: "A-dam, A-dam, A-dam." By striking the *talanton* in this way, the sacristan is calling Adam home from his long exile. He is in effect announcing to the whole monastery, and to all the earth and to heaven itself, that the gates of paradise, which once were closed, are now open. No longer does a *cherubim stand guard, with a flaming sword, barring the way to the tree of life* (Gen 3.24). Instead, that same angel now keeps guard over our souls, so that now we can remain *within* paradise.

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* An address delivered to the members of the Larissa Section of the Panhellenic Union of Theologians, on 19 March, 1987.

[1] From the *Doxastikon* of Saturday evening (*Lenten Triodion*, 169).

Adam no longer weeps. When Christ descended into the realm of death and the devil, He *preached to the spirits in prison* (cf. 1 Pet 3.19), and released them from their bonds, *shattering the bronze gates and breaking asunder the iron bars* (Ps 106.16). It was then that he seized Adam, and the whole human race, and led them into the earthly and heavenly paradise of the Church, which is a paradise much more sublime and delightful than the first.

In my remarks today, I would like to approach the mystery of paradise from a number of passages in Scripture and the Church Fathers. At the same time, I want to develop a comparison between paradise and the life of the Church as it is lived in an Orthodox monastery. In a monastery, not only does one see the full expression of the Christian life, but it is also the place where such a life can be lived with the greatest simplicity and ease.

We know that monasticism is the daily and unceasing assembly of the Church. It is thus the type and pattern of paradise in action and in power. And that's how we'll generally approach our theme, which will not always be easy, for we are dealing with matters that are both human and divine. From the outset we need to realize that these are not so much ideas or concepts, but rather facts and events, which are best understood by the heart. If we're just a little attentive, we'll feel the truth of these things, because it is the Holy Spirit who has planted them in our heart.

I. ON PARADISE

What was paradise? What does Scripture say about it? *The Lord God planted paradise in Eden, to the East* (Gen 2.8). In the first place, the phrase *to the East* indicates that paradise was in fact somewhere on earth.[2] The statement that God *planted paradise* – which depicts God as a kind of divine gardener – is meant to express the personal love, affection, interest, and the unique gift of God's own life, which He lavished upon man.[3]

Paradise, as we know, is the name of a particular kind of place, a very beautiful place, like a garden, which is fenced in or walled off, and thus protected and secure from the surrounding world. Paradise was unassailable by hostile forces. We also know that the name Eden means "delight," which is why the Septuagint text in one place says that *God took the man whom He had formed and placed him in the garden of Delight* (Gen 2.15).[4] So paradise was a place of delights: physical delights, because the fruits were delicious, and spiritual ones because of the presence of God.

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[2] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 13.13: "Moses inserted the name of the place in the text so that it would not be possible for those who are inclined to take things lightly to deceive the ears of the simple and say that the garden was not on earth but in heaven, and dream up wild theories of that kind. Nevertheless, there are some who deny Sacred Scripture and say that the garden was not on earth, taking a direction opposed to a literal understanding of the text, and thinking that what is said about the earth has to do with things in heaven. However, you must block your ears against them" (FOTC 74:175). Compare the remarks ascribed to St. Caesarius of Nazianzus, *Dialogue* 141: "Some people say that paradise is a spiritual, celestial place, knowable only to the mind, but others say that it was earthly, and thus fully capable of being perceived by the senses. I count myself among the latter, and affirm that paradise was located on this earth, for that is the testimony of Sacred Scripture" (PG 38.1049); and St. Methodios of Olympus, *On the Resurrection* 1.55: "It is quite obvious that paradise was of this earth, since from it flowed four rivers, of which *the name of the third is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria, while the name of the fourth is the Euphrates* (Gen 2.14)" (PG 41.1148B).

[3] Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis* 13.12: "Here, if we do not take the words in a manner appropriate to God, we will fall into a pit. When Scripture says that *God planted a garden in Eden,* it does not mean that He had need of tools, and gardening, and other skills with which to beautify the garden. The word *planted* means that God 'caused the garden to be created on earth,' as a dwelling place for the man whom He had created. This is why Scripture says: *God planted a garden . . . and placed in it the man He had formed*" (FOTC 74:174-175).

In his remarks "On Paradise," Saint John of Damascus tells us that "Paradise was situated in the east, and was higher than all the rest of the earth." In telling us that paradise was "higher than the rest of the earth," the Damascene is underlining its magnificence and beauty. He adds that: "paradise was temperate in climate, and shining with the most gentle and purest of air."[5] Now this is a strange thing. In speaking of the air, he tells us that paradise was "shining," that it was illumined, in other words, by "pure air and gentle breezes." But does a breeze illumine? Does air give light? What he wants to say is that the very atmosphere existed to serve man, and that even its most gentle of breezes had no other purpose but to bring to him the luminosity of God. The breeze filled Eden, and created a kind of cloud, like the *bright cloud* that appeared on Mt. Thabor (Mt 17.5), diffusing a perceptible brightness throughout the whole of paradise.

The breeze, then, was a vehicle, a means, by which God was conveyed to the inhabitants of paradise. It was, in a sense, what we might call a *photophoria*, a procession of light, indicating that all of creation, divinely animated, was in the service of God and had the explicit function of revealing and thereby bringing God to man.

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[4] Whereas the Hebrew text reads: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden" (Gen 2.15).

[5] St. John of Damascus, "On Paradise," in his *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.25 (FOTC: 230; English translation slightly altered to conform more closely to the original Greek).

Saint John goes on to say that paradise was "suffused with light." However, he does not mention any particular *source* of light, such as a fire or a lamp, but states that the light was spread everywhere, having been brought there by the breeze. More precisely, we can say that the phrase "suffused with light" means that paradise was suffused with God, who is always represented by light, which is not restricted to a particular point, but radiates outward and fills everything. Paradise, then, was filled with God, Who was always already fully present there, and arriving afresh on every breeze. He daily entered the garden without absenting Himself from the furthest corners of the universe, and He left it without ever being absent from it.

Summing up his remarks on the topography of paradise, Saint John notes that "this is truly a divine place, and a worthy dwelling for man created in the image of God." Do you see? Even though paradise was located on earth, it was not merely physical or human: it was also divine. It was not a place which appealed only to the senses, but addressed itself to the intellect, too. Like a human being composed of body and soul, paradise was both physical and spiritual, encompassing everything, since it was the dwelling place of both man and God. And thus the Damascene says that "Adam dwelt in paradise, and God dwelt in Adam, His image," so that Adam had God as both his "home and housemate." He lived in paradise, but his "home" was in God.

To the extent that paradise is divine and belongs to the spiritual order of things, Adam lived enveloped within God Himself. It wasn't the natural hedge of the garden, or the slopes of its hills, and not even the angels and archangels who served as guards. Instead, it was God Himself. This is what Saint John means when he says that Adam had God as "his home and housemate." They lived in the same house. Paradise, then, for Adam, and for every man and woman, is God: it means to dwell in God and with God.

With these things in mind, we may now turn to the experience of life in a monastery, so that you can see to what extent the monastery bears the marks of paradise.

As we saw, paradise was far removed from all other places, either due to its physical distance *in the East*, or due to its location on a lofty mountaintop. Its physical distance, moreover, was God's way of indicating, in a material way, how far away it was from anything that man could have imagined. In the same way, the monastery is a place that is separated from the world. Moreover, most monasteries are surrounded by walls, or located on a high mountain, where only God can protect the monks, who shields them from the temptations and tempests of the world.

In addition, the monastery's distance from the world is a symbol of its holiness, a word which designates something that has been set apart, consecrated for use only by God. And monks and nuns serve only God. Monasteries do not exist for economic or commercial or cultural reasons. They do not exist to support or satisfy human ends. Nothing in a monastery is worldly, or what Scripture calls *common* (cf. Acts 10.14). Every building, every room, every object, every action, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, are all dedicated to God. The monastery and everything in it is a liturgical vessel belonging to God.

And this was true in paradise, and it will continue to be true in God's eschatological kingdom, of which paradise was but a type. Concerning the heavenly Jerusalem, the true heavenly paradise, Scripture says: *On the bridle of the horse there shall be written the words: "Consecrated to the Lord"* (Zach 14.20). Do you see? There are no "secular" things in paradise, but everything is dedicated to the Lord. Even the harnesses of horses – an earthly image given to us so that we might understand something heavenly – even the harnesses of horses, I say, are sacred to the Lord.

Even the *pots in the house of the Lord*, which we might imagine as being blackened with soot from the fire, are sacred to God, *for they shall be as bowls before the altar* (Zach 14.20). Whatever the object or utensil might be, it is a bearer of the glory of God, since God's glory is what they serve and transmit. All these things, then, are lights that illuminate man and fill him with God.

For the same reason, the book of Revelation says that, of the New Jerusalem, *nothing unclean shall enter it, nor anyone who practices abominations or falsehood.* Who, then, will enter it? *Those who are written in the book of life of the Lamb* (Rev 21.27). And are the members of the Church, the members of Christ's body, inscribed within the book of the Lamb? Could any of those members *not* be so inscribed? Could God be unfair or unfaithful? Could God ever say: "Yes, I love you, but I'm still getting rid of you"? Impossible. To say that "we are members of the Church" means "we are written in the book of life." It means that potentially we have *already* entered the kingdom of heaven, that we have already crossed the threshold into paradise. On the one hand, we are still progressing toward heaven, still on our pilgrimage to paradise, because we still live on earth and are subject to change, but on the other hand we're already there, because paradise, on earth and in heaven, is one and the same. Not two, but one. I'm both in paradise and moving toward it. Like Adam, I have my dwelling place in paradise, and in God. We're living in paradise! Yes we are! Perhaps our eyes do not see it, or perhaps our lungs cannot take in its air, but God has opened paradise and placed us within it.

Let's look again at the monastery. What is a monastery? As we've said, it's the whole Church gathered together, present in its fullness, day and night. At one level, this is because all the services of the Church are celebrated day after day, week after week, year in and year out. Not a day passes without the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. But it is not just the performance of the services that makes the Church. It's the assembly, the gathering, the coming together, so that *the multitude of believers are of one heart and one soul* (Acts 4.32), so that all become the *body of Christ as their Head, and members of each other* (1 Cor 12.12). And this unity, this harmony, this all-embracing fullness of life, in which God dwells with mankind, is the whole of paradise.

This is why the Church has always understood the monastery as both a reference to the paradise that was lost, and the mystery of the paradise which is to come: the kingdom of God. In the concentrated gathering of the Church that we see in the monastery, we experience the restoration of the communion that was lost in paradise. The monastery is thus a type of the *city of God* (Heb 12.22), which is both in heaven and here on earth. In the monastery, paradise is a living reality, and the monastery is nothing more than the intense living out of the life of the Church.

Let's return now to the book of Revelation, which says: *I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away* (Rev 21.1). Saint John is describing a new, heavenly reality, since the *first earth had passed away.* What exactly is his prophetic eye beholding? What is enfolded in this revelation granted to him by God?

With the fall, man's state of incorruptibility, which was his by grace, was lost. Together with Adam, the whole of creation was caught in the throes of corruption and death, and heaven and earth were darkened with tribulation. Adam now looked upon an earth and sky that were no longer what they once had been. They were changed, disfigured by the presence of sin and death. And Saint John saw them change again, and become *a new heaven and a new earth.* Given, as we said, that this is a spiritual, heavenly reality, it is not something that we can see with our eyes, but is nonetheless something that we perceive spiritually. And the *new heaven and earth* is the reality into which our world is now entering, the environment that surrounds the throne of God. Heaven and earth have entered a process of transformation which will be completed at the end of time, when all things will be definitively transformed and renewed.

Everything has changed. Everything has been *made new* (Rev 21.5). The city of God, Jerusalem, paradise, God's presence, our relationship with God, with the earth, with heaven, are not what they were before. They've been replaced by relationships which are similar but now have a spiritual and eschatological character. This means that everywhere – in heaven, on earth, within our sinful hearts – there is, in some sense, the newness of God, which has entered powerfully into the world, and is now propelling it, and mankind in particular, toward its perfection. It's as if God was the innermost soul of the world, the innermost life of the world, transforming the earth into paradise because it (the earth) has become one and the same with heaven: *the whole earth is filled with His heavenly glory* (cf. Is 6.3).

As a result, earth and paradise, heaven and earth, are now one, because God and man have been inseparably united in Jesus Christ. Thus our *citizenship* on earth partakes of our *citizenship in heaven* (Phil 3.20), for *we have come to the city of the living God,* the *heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, which* *is the Church of the first-born* (Heb 12.22-23). One world, one heaven, one paradise: the human mind, so deeply divided, simply can't encompass it! These are divine revelations. But we can feel them, our hearts are touched by them, our wills give their assent to them, and we say: "Yes, that's exactly how it is. It couldn't be otherwise."

There is then, already in this world, the *city* which descended from above, the place of our ultimate *citizenship*, our true homeland, where our hearts live. It is at once within the world and yet beyond it, something we can experience and participate in, and yet beyond mind and imagination, beyond the senses, like the mountain of paradise, whose foothills we see in the distance, but whose summit is lofty and exalted. Paradise is present in our world and present in our hearts. And my enjoyment of paradise surpasses that of Adam, for he was but a child, a person not fully mature. To be sure, he was innocent and pure, but lacking in experience and not able to comprehend the mysteries before him. Those mysteries had to be revealed gradually, and had to pass through his failure, which has become our success.[6]

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6. Whereas some Church Fathers emphasize the perfection of Adam in paradise, others suggest that such perfection was not absolute, and that the first man was relatively childlike and immature. See, for example, St. Theophilos of Antioch, *To Autolycus* 2.25: "It was not the tree which brought death, but rather the act of disobedience, for the fruit of it was nothing other than knowledge, and knowledge is good, when someone makes right and responsible use of it. Adam, however, was but a child, and thus not yet capable of properly comprehending the fruit of the tree" (PG 8.1041A). The same idea is also found in St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4; and 4.38.1-2 (PG 7.359A; 1105C): "God would have gladly bestowed upon man all perfection, but man at that point was not able to receive it, for he was still an infant (*nepios*)." Note that the Greek word *nepios* is the negation (by the prefix *ne*) of the word "speech" (*epos* - from which come words like "epic" poetry). To the extent that *epos* is tied to *logos*, there is a sense in which

As Saint John is contemplating the new creation, he hears a voice saying: *Behold! The tent of God is with men, and He shall dwell in it with them* (Rev 21.3). Like the sheet that the Apostle Peter saw (Acts 10.11-16),[7] the kingdom of God descends to earth, like a new paradise, embracing all the animals, so that none can be said to be clean or unclean. Those who lived in virtue and those who had formerly lived in sin, are all together in paradise. We have found paradise, and, from this point on, we shall follow its paths ever deeper into the celestial regions, into the bosom of God.

It follows, then, that life in a monastery is one of continual progress, continual movement toward God. Every day the monk retraces his steps to the church, every day he takes his place in the *assembly of the first born.* And when the service concludes, he carries the same spirit with him wherever he goes: in his cell, going about his chores, in the refectory, and so on. Everywhere it's the same event, the same experience. And he feels that he has entered into and is living in paradise. The monk lives in a spiritual paradise, a garden of heavenly delights, which nourishes him, and which he in turn keeps and cultivates, season after season, so that he may fully reap the harvest of his perfection.

Looking again to the celestial city, we see that it *has a great, lofty wall with twelve gates, and at the gates are twelve angels* (Rev 21.12). What is this *great and lofty wall*, infinitely higher than that which encircled the earthly paradise? It is God Himself. God is the *great and lofty wall*, for in this new world God is all things, and thus Saint

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Adam's childlike or immature state is not simply physiological or cognitive, but indicates that, at a much deeper level, he had not yet been fully united with (or conformed to) his archetype, the Logos of God.

[7] On which, see above, chap. 6, n. 12.

John *saw no temple in the city, and no sun or moon, for its temple is the Lord God, and the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb* (cf. Rev 21.22-23). In the new city, *all things are subject to Christ, Who is subject to God, and thus God is everything to everyone* (cf. 1 Cor 15.28).

And why twelve gates? To correspond to the twelve tribe of Israel, the twelve apostles, and so on. But it also means that heaven will be filled with great multitudes of people, *for my house,* God says, *must be filled* (cf. Lk 14.23). The image of gates, moreover, suggests movement in and out of the city. By whom? The twelve angels? But they have no need of gates or doors. They can only be for the saints, the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. But for what purpose? So that the saints, who have preceded us to paradise, may return to the earth for our benefit? Or is it for us to go up there?

With the image of the twelve gates, and the freedom of movement it represents, Saint John underlines the essential unity of the heavenly and earthly paradise, and the unbroken communion of the Church and the heavenly Jerusalem. The ranks of the saints are in constant communion with us, and we communicate with them through our prayers, through the sacraments, and so on. The traffic is continuous, and it is served by twelve roads and twelve gates.[8]

Do you see how the saints watch over our lives and protect us? The angels *have been given charge over us, to keep us safe* (Ps 90.11).

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[8] Compare St. Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*: "The great and lofty wall of the Church is Christ, and the twelve gates are His holy Apostles, through whom we have gained access to God the Father. In this they are assisted by twelve angels that are close to God, for if each of the faithful has received a guardian angel, how much more so those who founded the churches and spread the seeds of the Gospels?" (PG 106:429D).

The angels have their eyes wide open: they are the watchers of the city, and they receive signals from God and hasten to transmit them to us. And they escort the saints to earth, so that they might help us, and raise us and our prayers up to heaven. And so through these great paradisal doors pass all our pain, our prayers, and our tears, and so reach the eyes and ears of God. Saint John wants to show us that there is one kingdom, one power, one communion, both there and here, in heaven and on earth. Between them there are no boundaries. Boundaries have been abolished. There is only one kingdom, one city, one life in God.

Monasteries likewise have great walls and strong foundations. Come to the Holy Mountain and see the foundations established by the saints. You'll be amazed to see that everything bears the imprint of paradise.

And the foundations of the wall of the city are *adorned with every precious stone* (Rev 21.19). So the foundations are not made merely from stone, but are adorned with *every kind of precious stone* that exists. And what can the precious foundations of the heavenly city be, if not the apostles, the martyrs, and all the saints? And we too, when we *come to Christ, the living stone, become precious and chosen stones, built into a spiritual house* (cf. 1 Pet 2.4-5).

Unlike worldly foundations, those of the heavenly city remain visible. And this is to show that, before all time, even before the formation of paradise, our names have been recorded in the book of life. Before the foundations of the world were set in place, God had already established His plans for us. Long ago He selected us and assigned a place for us to occupy, either on the foundations below or on the walls above.

This is why the Psalmist says: *They who have put their trust in the Lord are like Mount Sion* (Ps 124.1), which means that they are strong, firm, and steadfast. That's how God made us. And having decided to save us, He shall never repent of His decision, provided that we ourselves desire to be saved by Him. But God Himself will not change, for *He who dwells in Jerusalem shall never be moved* (Ps 124.1). God will never be moved from His purpose. He will never change His mind. He will never cease to be God. He will find a way to save us, so long as that is what we want.

Jerusalem, then, is well-built, and established on solid foundations. And all of its life is organized around the temple, which *binds it together in unity* (Ps 121.3). All movement begins and ends in the temple, which is the focal point of life and activity. And this is because the temple is the dwelling place of God, the beginning and end of all things, and thus the ultimate destination of our heart's desire.

And so in the middle of the monastery stands the main church, which is the center of our life. Not just our devotional life, but of all our life. Everything that happens in the monastery takes place in the sight of God, before His eyes.

And yet Saint John, gazing upon the heavenly Jerusalem, *did not see a temple in it* (Rev 21.22). Why? Because God has taken its place. What was the ancient temple? The presence of God, the place where His name was sanctified. The temple, then, was the locus of divine presence, the place where God stood. But all of that changed when God descended to earth and clothed Himself in the temple of the body. Wood, stones, precious gems and the other materials that constituted the earthly temple, were at that moment replaced by flesh and bone. And this is why Saint John says *I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb* (Rev 21.22). In the sacred temple of His body, God now dwells behind a *curtain of flesh* (cf. Heb 10.19).

To put it differently, we can also say that, in virtue of the incarnation, we too are now His raiment; we too are now His garments, woven, as it were, into His priestly vestments and into the veil of His body. We are His body, His Church. In the same way that the Mother of God once covered His divinity with her own being, giving herself to Him as a covering, becoming, as it were, His clothing, so too do we become His garments. He took on our flesh and endowed it with His divinity, so that now He is man and I am god. Together we form one body, with one head, Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 12.5; Eph 1.22-23).

Though we live on earth, our lives have already been woven into the fabric of God's heavenly temple. We have no use for external sources of illumination, *for God is our light and our lamp is the Lamb* (Rev 21.23). We no longer search for God outside of ourselves, because now He emerges from within us, from the innermost shrine of the soul within the temple of the body. Christ has taken up his abode within us, and He is inseparably united to the Father and the Holy Spirit. Paradise, then, is not a place that we seek somewhere outside of ourselves, but rather within ourselves, because each of us has become an intimate part of it, *like precious stones built into a spiritual house* (1 Pet 2.5).

II. HOW WE SHALL STAND BEFORE GOD

What, then, my dear friends, should our stance be in view of this paradise, which is both within us, and of which we are a part? How does one live in paradise? *Naked, but not ashamed* (Gen 2.25). And what does it mean to stand *naked* before God? It means to approach God in simplicity, naturally, artlessly, spontaneously, stripped of our shallow complexity and complications. Adam and Eve loved God naturally, without affectation, without constraints, without tortured second thoughts and calculations. They were naked of all those things, and thus they were free.

And this is why candidates for baptism are stripped of their clothes. This is why nakedness is at the heart of the monastic tonsure, both in the exchange of garments and in the cutting of the hair. In early times, both monks and nuns had all of their hair removed at their tonsure, in semblance of the nakedness of Adam and Eve before God. And that is what it means to be a monk or a nun: to reject every bond with the world, to *lay aside every growth of sin which clings so closely* (Heb 12.1). Monks and nuns should not clothe themselves in the garments of social relationships; they should be shorn of all opinions, empty of information, desires and experiences. They should forget everything, leave everything, because nothing in the world is of any value in a monastery.

And we are not afraid or ashamed of the nakedness to which God wants to bring us, for it is a state of purity and blamelessness. The concern of the monk is to worship and praise the creator, to stand before God in the paradise of the Church, and join his voice to those of the angels. The work of the monk, the means by which he *tills and cultivates the garden* (Gen 2.15), is prayer, spiritual study, and his relationship with his spiritual father. The ground he cultivates is the earth of his heart, which he finds when he *goes into his cell and shuts the door and prays to his Father Who is in secret* (cf. Mt 6.6). The deeper he digs, the more he will strip his intellect of all thoughts, memories, and images that darken his mind and cloud his heart. He will increasingly come to reject all those things that bind him to the world, that seek to imprison him in what is petty, human, and vain. Why? Because he knows that all of these things are thieves that seek to steal God from him.

Adam had open and ceaseless communication with God until the serpent came between them. The serpent's aim was to destroy Adam's relationship with God, to steal Adam's glory, and to bring paradise to ruin. But the serpent got more than he bargained for, since he was utterly trampled down by Christ, the new Adam, and now the doors of paradise stand open to all. Do not, then, let the serpent of evil thoughts come between you and God.

III. OUR TASK

What sort of work will occupy us in paradise? What sort of work did Adam and Eve do? As Scripture says, *the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Delight to cultivate and keep it* (Gen 2.15), in other words, to protect and cultivate the plants there. Those plants were like a robe of divine beauty, forming a natural world, a natural expression, of God's majestic holiness. The natural world was a reflection of God's grandeur, and through nature God was visible to the eyes of our first ancestors. In tending the garden they were attending to the glory and majesty of God, carefully tilling and cultivating the living things around them.

In the first place, then, comes work. We can never experience God without work. People who don't work hard and succeed at their earthly labors are not likely to find much success in their spiritual lives. We have to work.

After placing Adam and Eve in the garden, God said to them: *you may eat of any of the trees in paradise* (Gen 2.16). Don't be surprised by this. Eating is also a spiritual task, because paradise is a place that relates both to the senses of the body and to those of the intellect. Adam communed with God by means of the fruit of the trees, which was a figure of the food of heaven, about which Christ says: *Take, eat, and drink* (Mt 26.26-27). By eating of the food of the garden, Adam wasn't merely nourishing his body, but also his soul. It was a way for him to participate in God. And thus when we hear the words: *Take, eat, drink*, we hear the voice of God calling us to the communion of paradise. But whereas Adam's food was the fruit of the garden, we eat of the *bread which came down from heaven* (Jn 6.32-35).

For Adam, the act of eating and drinking was an ascent toward God. And so it is with us: we are nourished by the divine teachings, and *by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God* (Mt 4.4). The words of the Fathers are also food and drink, as are the lives of the saints, and all the prayers and hymns of the Church. And this is our garden of delights, our Eden, a divine banquet, an enjoyment of, and inebriation with, God. This is how the kingdom of God is made palatable to us, digestible, and thus able to offer itself to us as spiritual nourishment.

Of course, there was one tree, as you know, the fruit of which Adam was forbidden to eat, because he wasn't yet ready, he hadn't matured enough. In order for someone to receive a great spiritual gift, or the revelation of a great mystery, he must grow and mature in obedience, in order to show, over a long period of time, that this is what he wanted. This is why your spiritual father may give you a rule: "For two years you'll do this or that," so that you can show in those two years, or two months, or whatever the time is, that there's been a change for the better, with your obedience being the sign of your commitment. That is what God did with Adam.

That God sought to bring Adam to knowledge by degrees can be seen by the introduction of animals into the garden. Before presenting him with Eve, God presented Adam with the animals, and told him to name them (Gen 2.19). He gave him no other orders or instructions. He wanted Adam to realize that he was the king of creation, able to impose names on all the creatures. But what did

Adam feel? Exactly what God wanted him to feel: that he was alone. All the animals approached him in pairs, and all the pairs lived collectively in herds, flocks, and various kinds of social arrangements. Adam, however, was unique among creatures in being alone. He thus perceived the need for a helper, for human community and society.

It was then that God said: *Let us make him a helper of his own kind* (Gen 2.18). So God made woman. And yet this was not because of any moral problem, or because of anything biological or physical, because marriage isn't a physical relationship, even though the body participates in it. Thus the creation of Eve was a sacred rite, a mystical act, a rite of initiation, because marriage is a passage to fullness of life Christ. To marry is to enter the kingdom, to enter paradise.[9]

And this becomes clear when we recall the words of the Prophet Malachi: *She is your partner and the wife of your covenant* (Mal 2.14). You and your wife, in other words, are one, and together you have signed God's covenant. Marriage, then, is an oath taken before God, the establishment of a covenant. And this covenant is not signed with blood, in the way that Christ signed the New Covenant, but is signed by the cohabitation and communion of the husband and the wife.

And the prophet goes on to ask the following: *Has not one God created and sustained for you the spirit of life?* (Mal 2.14). This means that it was not one God who created you and another who made your wife, but one and the same God who created you both and brought you together in marriage. It's as if God is saying: "I am one God, and thus I place upon the two of you a single stamp, a single sign; My imprint makes you Mine, and at the same time makes you one."

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[9] See Arch. Aimilianos, "Marriage: The Great Sacrament."

And then the prophet says: *And there was a remainder of His spirit* (Mal 2.15). We know that God *breathed into Adam the breath of life* (Gen 2.7). But when He did, He held back some of His breath, a *remainder of His spirit*, so that it might be breathed into the woman, so that she too might become *a living soul* (Gen 2.7). And thus God says to the husband: "Do you see? I gave some of my breath to you, and some of it to your wife. But my Spirit is one, and so now you and she are one person." And all of this is but a foreshadowing, a prelude, to the unity of all mankind in the body of the Church.

The prophet continues: *What does God seek but godly offspring?* (Mal 2.15). Those who marry are to have children. Certainly, so that the children can also make their way to heaven, where God has inscribed their names in the book of life. But this is not simply a matter of biological reproduction. God wants you to feel His life-giving, productive presence in your union, so that your communion and your home may be filled with life.

Therefore *guard yourselves in your spirit and do not forsake the wife of your youth* (Mal 2.15). Don't abandon your wife. Marriage is indissoluble. Why? For the same reason that God and the Church are indissoluble. If the Church could be broken up and made into many churches, if God could be divided and broken up into parts, only then would it be possible for marriage to be broken, since husband and wife together are the Church. That's how high God has exalted the state of marriage: it is the *mystery of Christ and His Church* (Eph 5.32).

It was in paradise that Adam learned how to live in community, and this is why all community and all communal forms of life look back to paradise as the place of their origin. The archetype for society first appeared in paradise, and this was itself a revelation to human beings of the form of God's eternal kingdom.

But there can be no true community without a voluntary, self-offering of one's freedom to God. The co-existence of isolated individuals, each bent on the pursuit of his or her own private interests and desires, may perhaps be termed a kind of society, but it cannot be called a community. God has given me the gift of my freedom for no other reason than that I should return it to Him. But if I seek instead to retain my freedom in a selfish, egotistical way, I shall become a slave of mindless impulse and desire. My need for love and companionship is essentially a longing for God, and not even my marriage will be of any help to me if I do not have the Church for my spouse. Marriage, then, like monasticism, is a longing for the infinite; it is not the satisfaction of a biological drive, but an orientation of the self toward the eschaton. Marriage is a journey, an ascent toward the perfection of paradise, which is, as we've said, a place that we've already entered and into which we continue to progress.

This is why Solomon says *Drink waters from your own vessels and from the wells of your own springs* (Prov 5.15). What does he mean by this? It means you are to have only one wife. You are not to go running to other wells, to other women, where you have no business to be. You are not to partake of enjoyments that are not meant for you. At the same time, monogamy has a deeper meaning: we are the bride of one God, and each of us is barred from drinking at other wells, from seeking to refresh ourselves at alien sources. We must drink, in other words, only from the rivers of paradise, only from the cup of life given to us within the Church.

As the Psalmist says, we've been espoused to the *beauty of God* (cf. Ps 46.5), which is the Church, the heavenly paradise. To her we must be faithful, and from her our eyes must not wander, and we must never forget the vows we've made to her, so as never to fall away. We must be entranced and absorbed by her beauty. It is she who brings us God, and without her we cannot live. When we have the well, we also have the wall, along with the foundation; then we have everything.

EPILOGUE

How does a monk live day and night for God? He can only do this to the extent that he is already living in paradise. And this is the proper aim of every human life. As much as we can, let us try to do in spirit, in a spiritual sense, what monks do every day in their monasteries. Let us feel that we are separate from the world. That means that we are living in the world, but are not of the world (cf. Jn 15.19). My salvation will be worked out in the monastery. Yours will take place in your home, the place of your daily existence, and in your social life, and through your church. Wherever we are, we will drink from our own wells, and if we remain faithful to the Church, our cups will be brimming with the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The first paradise and its first occupants are now gone. The second paradise, which is the place of communion with God, is the Church. It is the spiritual paradise in which dwells Christ, the second Adam. And Christ, having clothed himself in my human nature, has entered into the depths of my being, so that now paradise is within us, for we are filled with the presence of God. Wherever I am, wherever you are, my dear friends, wherever we happen to be, and despite the fact that we are sinners, that is where you will find paradise. Have we then found paradise? We have, and it is within us.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACW = Ancient Christian Writers: The Fathers of the Church in Translation (New York: Paulist Press, 1946 ff.)

ANF = Ante-Nicene Fathers (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, repr. 1978)

FOTC = The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press)

GNO = *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, ed. Werner Jaeger, et. al. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960 ff.)

LCL = The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1912 ff.)

LNPNF = A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans; repr. 1978)

PG = *Patrologia cursus completus, series graeca* (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857-1866)

SC = *Sources chrétiennes* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1942 ff.)

SIAD = Spiritual Instructions and Discourses

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